UC San Diego

UC San Diego Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

“Dope Hope”: Synanon House and the Makings of a Recovery Counterculture, 1945-1965

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5j18q72n

Author

Mylet, Jordan

Publication Date

2023

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

"Dope Hope":
Synanon House and the Makings of a Recovery Counterculture, 1945-1965

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

History

by

Jordan Mylet

Committee in charge:

Professor Luis Alvarez, Co-Chair
Professor Rebecca Jo Plant, Co-Chair
Professor Claire Edington
Professor Sarah Schneewind
Professor Shelley Streeby
Professor Daniel Widener

2023

Copyright

Jordan Mylet, 2023

All rights reserved.

The Dissertation of Jordan Mylet is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego

2023

Table of Contents

Dissertation Approval Page…… iii

Table of Contents…….. iv

List of Figures…… v

Acknowledgments……. vi

Vita…… viii

Abstract……. ix

Prologue…… 1

Introduction…… 6

Chapter 1: "No Place to Go:" Addiction Treatment, Institutional Confinement, and Synanon as Alternative, 1945-1961……. 19

Chapter 2: "A Breath of Fresh Air": The AA Movement, Recovery Countercultures, and Creating Synanon in Postwar Los Angeles, 1935-1959…….. 72

Chapter 3: Getting Clean "In the Stream of Life": Sobriety, Self-Realization, and Community in Synanon House, 1959-1965……. 127

Chapter 4: "Help us preserve the right to help ourselves": Synanon's Fight for Self-Determination, 1959-1961 …….. 179

Conclusion…… 216

Bibliography……. 221

List of Figures

Figure 1: Synanon House, where my grandfather lived, circa 1968……..…… 3

Figure 2: Betty Beckham, circa 1961……..……. 20

Figure 3: Scenes from "The Monkey," 1953 ……. 31

Figure 4: *Wash Tubbs* comic strip, May 11, 1949…….…….. 78

Figure 5: Charles E. Dederich in Synanon, undated……... 94

Figure 6: TLC's storefront on Ocean Park Promenade, 1958 or 1959……...…… 117

Figure 7: Fire insurance map of Ocean Park Promenade, 1950. Synanon's storefront was located at 2801 Promenade, the left-most box colored red before the map ends. It lay directly across the Pacific Ocean and to the left of the Ocean Park Pier. The yellow rectangles are apartment and tenement buildings…….. 133

Figure 8: Fire insurance map of Ocean Park Promenade, 1963. Synanon's entire block had been razed, as had much of the apartment and tenement housing……... 134

Figure 9: Synanon's new home, the "armory," on Santa Monica beach, circa 1960…….…… 139

Figure 10: Jack Hurst, one-time member of the "Vice Squad," working on the armory, circa 1960……. 141

Figure 11: Sunbathing in front of Synanon House, 1961…….….. 142

Figure 12: Kitchen crew, circa 1961. Betty Beckham is third from the left……..… 149

Figure 13: Christmas at Synanon, December 1960…… 152

Figure 14: Synanon kids singing, circa 1960……. 153

Figure 15: Newcomer, on couch, going through withdrawal alongside two Owl Watchers, 1960……...…155

Figure 16: A small-s synanon in action, 1960…… 160

Figure 17: SynaGras, 1962……... 173

Figure 18: Dance performance, with Betty Beckham in the middle…….. 174

Figure 19: Fritz Perls playing chess with another Saturday Night Party guest, 1961…… 176

Acknowledgments

Thank you first and foremost to my committee, who are truly the best bunch of thinkers, writers, and human beings I could ask for: my co-chairs, Luis Alvarez and Rebecca Jo Plant, and Claire Edington, Sarah Schneewind, Shelley Streeby, and Daniel Widener. You have been so generous with your time, attention, and insight throughout this long journey, and taught me so much about what it means to do historical work with rigor and heart. I feel very lucky to have worked with you all.

I am also grateful for the scholars who blew my mind on a daily basis and made me fall in love with history as an undergraduate at New York University: Manu Goswami, Joan Malczewski, Barbara Weinstein, Marilyn Young, and Jonathan Zimmerman. They opened my eyes to the possibility that I could pursue this as a future. This dissertation is in memoriam to Marilyn Young, in particular, who was the first historian from whom I ever learned, and my god, what good fortune. I will always remember her intellectual and moral clarity.

Thank you to the team of archivists and preservationists at the Charles E. Young Library at the University of California, Los Angeles, especially Jet, Nick, Yasmin, Amy, and Allie. Your thoughtfulness and general being great at what you do made those six months of daily research go so much smoother (especially when I messed up those Aeon requests). Even more than that, thank you for all the work you have done, and insight you have given me, on how to make the Synanon collection more accessible.

Much love and respect to those who were there during this climb to doctoral status in UCSD's History department. Kevan, Pete, Reuben, Inga, Graeme, Matt, Amanda, and Jorge—I had so much fun with you. Thank you to the faculty members, at UCSD and beyond, with whom I have worked and who have shown me all the ways one can be a great historian and person:

Stanley Chodorow, Claire Clark, Frances Clarke, Mark Hanna, Mark Hendrickson, Rachel Klein, Nancy Kwak, and Carina Ray.

Thank you to the editors of the *Australasian Journal of American Studies* for shepherding my first published work into existence. Chapter 1, in part, contains material as it appears in "How to Treat an Addict: Institutional Confinement, Mutual Aid, and Self Realization in Postwar Los Angeles. Mylet Jordan, *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2, December 2021, pp. 5-48.

Thank you to all the Synanon people who brought me into their world, and with whom I have shared so much of my life. You were always the best dinner companions.

To my grandparents—this dissertation is a love letter to you. You are my favorite people and my heart.

To my mother and father, who are always, always in my corner, no matter what.

To Tobin, my sharpest editor, who knows me inside and out, and to baby Shai, who has brought every single thing into focus. I love you both.

Vita

2012 Bachelor of Arts with High Honors in History, New York University

2019 Master of Arts in History, University of California San Diego

2023 Doctor of Philosophy in History, University of California San Diego

Abstract of the Dissertation

"Dope Hope":
Synanon House and the Makings of a Recovery Counterculture, 1945-1965

by

Jordan Mylet

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California San Diego, 2023

Professor Luis Alvarez, Co-Chair
Professor Rebecca Jo Plant, Co-Chair

This dissertation argues that Synanon offered an alternative to the experiences of institutional confinement that dominated the lives of heroin users and addicts in post-World War II Los Angeles, and that its philosophy of getting clean forwarded alternative ways of living and structuring society. It focuses on Synanon's origins and formative years, from 1958 to 1965, and the perspectives of Synanon people themselves in order to explore their creation of a recovery counterculture. Moving away from prevailing attitudes about sobriety as a path to middle-class

respectability, Synanon saw sobriety as a springboard to social experimentation and self-realization. They also rejected the dominant postwar policy of mandatory addiction treatment, and instead demanded autonomy from government and professional medical authority. The story of Synanon, often reduced to a simplistic narrative of "drug rehab turned cult," actually has far-reaching implications for the fields of addiction and recovery, nonconformity and dissent, and utopian communities and social movements in the twentieth-century United States.

Prologue

I remember sitting with my grandparents in their living room, talking about Synanon, like we had done so many times before. But this time, my grandfather told me a story I had never heard—the story of how he had ended up there. It was a summer day in 1968 in his hometown of the South Bronx, New York City. He was twenty-seven years old, high on heroin, and nodding off on the street, "*literally* sitting in a gutter!" (My grandfather laughed at this part, tickled by the cliché of it all.) Suddenly, his father, a taxi driver, pulled up in front of him. He had been looking for his son, who had been addicted to heroin for seven years at this point, and he had a proposition in mind. My grandfather's father had heard about a place out in Los Angeles called Synanon. Word had it that it was the only place where addicts had any chance at getting clean. He told my grandfather that a plane ticket was waiting for him if he would give this place a try. My grandfather, tired of doing the same thing every day, said, okay—but only if his father gave him a couple dollars to "cop," or buy drugs, first. His father said, okay. My grandfather did not know it yet, but when he took out his "kit" and shot up in the cramped airplane bathroom, it would be the last time that he ever did.

When he arrived in Los Angeles, my grandfather was picked up by a relative and driven straight to Synanon, located in a huge, majestic building on the beach. He walked into the lobby and up one of the curved staircases leading to the main floor, where a man sat behind a desk. "Can we help you?" "I'm coming from New York," my grandfather said, "I'm getting sick and I've heard of Synanon and I'd like to come in." The man replied, "Well, you know, we don't take people who just *drop in*"—and here, my grandfather laughed again, remembering—"We have a whole waiting list of people trying to get in. Come back in the morning." My grandfather's relative put him up in a hotel across the street and told him to go "straight over" the next day,

which he did, because he was really starting to feel sick, having not used heroin since the flight. The man at the front desk brought him to a room with five or six other people, who "ran their stories" and shared how long they had been clean: two years, three months, eight months. They asked how much money he could donate, and he told them he had no money at all. They teased him—"We've got this big line of people wanting to come in, and you've got nothing!"—but the decision, so to speak, had already been made. He was in.

My grandfather's life in Synanon began that day. The people he had been talking to led him past a grand ballroom to the living room where he would "kick," or go through withdrawal, on one of the many couches, with a pan set in front of him for vomit. Somebody was with him "all the time" over the next few days, "running their story," giving him "affirmation," and making him milkshakes. When he felt a little better, he went to the sauna and played volleyball on the beach out front. He was assigned to the midnight to six a.m. shift of Synanon's Maintenance Crew and cleaned the floors. He listened to tapes of Chuck Dederich, Synanon's founder and leader, talking to newcomers back in the early 1960s, when Synanon had just begun. He started dating one of the women in the house, with whom he would have a baby, one of Synanon's first. Over the course of the next two decades, my grandfather rode motorcycles up the California coast, lived in an old paint factory in San Francisco and a stately building on Embassy Row in Washington D.C., ran four marathons, read the Tao Te Ching and the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, fell in love with my grandmother and married her in a mass, Renaissance Faire-themed wedding with one hundred and ten other couples, and more. Once, my grandpa held up his thumb and forefinger, the pads almost touching, and said, "Before Synanon, my world was *this big*." In Synanon, it expanded beyond anything he had ever imagined.



Figure 1: Synanon House, where my grandfather lived, circa 1968.

As in any world, there was bad and good. Both of my grandparents made sacrifices to stay in Synanon, and both eventually grew disillusioned with it, too. In 1977, when Dederich initiated the community-wide process of "changing partners," during which all couples in Synanon had to split up and recouple with other people, they were married and deeply in love. They held out for weeks. But ultimately, it was a choice between leaving Synanon—which many couples did—or acquiesce to the new order. They chose the latter. My grandmother said that for years afterward, food had no taste in her mouth and everything appeared drained of color, just black and white. My grandfather ran twenty miles back and forth between the two Synanon properties in Northern California every day, trying to exhaust himself so completely that his grief and longing would be obliterated. Slowly, they started to notice that their home was not what it used to be. For a long time, my grandmother did not believe the reports that Synanon people had put a rattlesnake in that lawyer's mailbox, but she finally came to realize that, yes, a couple of them had. My grandfather saw proof of Dederich's disintegration with his own eyes—empty

purple boxes of Crown Royal scattered all around the man's trailer. One day, my grandmother woke up and realized that Synanon was over for her. Shortly thereafter, she and my grandfather, who had remarried by that point, left for good. It was 1990, and my mother was pregnant with me. They drove down to San Diego, where my mother and a large group of former Synanon people had settled, and made a new life—though one that was still, in many ways, within Synanon's orbit.

For them, and for so many Synanon people that I have known throughout my life, the bad does not negate the good, but lives alongside it. Synanon was a world unto itself; it was the entire framework in which they existed for decades of their lives. Even after they left, the community that they built there, the philosophies that they pondered and the practices in which they participated still carried a great deal of meaning for them. And yet what was left of Synanon in popular memory—when it was remembered at all—was a smattering of magazine articles and news broadcasts portraying it as another crazy cult of the 1970s, its members brainwashed by their almighty leader.

While writing this dissertation, I came across Vivian Gornick's *The Romance of American Communism*. Like me, Gornick wrote as a descendant of people who belonged to something all-encompassing and powerful and complicated. She came of age in the late 1940s and 1950s, at the height of McCarthyism, and watched respectable, influential people describe her family members and friends and the cause to which they had devoted themselves in ways that were unrecognizable to her. They spoke, Gornick wrote:

> of The Convert to the Communist Party as though describing a creature who walks through one door a warm human individual and emerges through another a rubber-stamped robot… [They] deny the teeming, contradictory life behind the word [Communist], and in so doing deny the experience its complex human source. No, I always feel myself frowning when I read their words, it was not like that, it was not like that at all. It was not the monolithic experience you are here

> describing; it was rather a vast, sprawling, fragmented, intensely various experience... [It] was, both in its glory and in its debasement, an awesome move toward humanness; an immense and tormented effort of the heart, will and brain… It is a metaphor for fear and desire on the grand scale, always telling us more—never less—of what it is to be human.[1]

Replace the word "Communist" with "cult member," and there had never been a passage so evocative of my feelings about Synanon and Synanon people, and the work I wanted to write about them. It felt like I had been granted permission to treat Synanon as something real and sincere, even though it had also been flawed and had hurt people. Much had been written, I thought, about Synanon's "debasement," but not nearly enough had been said about its "awesome move toward humanness."

Even then, when I first started to write about Synanon, it felt impossible. There was too much to cover, too much that had never been explored. Yet time and again, I returned to the people who had called it home when it was just a wild experiment, a long shot chance at getting clean on their own terms. How did they find their way to Synanon? Why did they move in, and why did they stay? What meaning did they find and create there? I decided to let their experiences and insights guide my way through the "vast, sprawling, fragmented, intensely various" world that was Synanon. In the process, I found that they had a great deal to say about addiction and sobriety, yes, but also about "what it [was] to be human." Synanon was many things, but mindless was not one of them.

[1] Vivian Gornick, *The Romance of American Communism* (New York: Verso, 2020), 19-20.

Introduction

Type the word "Synanon" in an online search engine, and this is what shows up: An episode of the television series "Deadly Cults," promising to tell the story of "a group of blind followers willing to do anything at their leader's urging, even murder."[1] Black and white photographs of dozens of bald-headed women smiling a little too broadly; others showing an official-looking man in a suit and tie stretching out the body of a rattlesnake between his hands. Popular articles with variations of the same title: "How a Drug Rehab Program Became a Violent Cult," and "The Story of This Drug Rehab-Turned-Violent Cult is Wild, Wild Country-Caliber Bizarre."[2] Synanon is the stuff of popular culture, true crime podcasts and online clickbait.

What would not show up is a large amount of academic scholarship. Synanon occasionally surfaces in the literature on addiction and recovery in the twentieth-century U.S., but not as the primary focus.[3] It is almost entirely absent from histories of social movements in the long 1960s, as well as those of dissent, nonconformity, and counterculture in the post-World War II period.[4] Synanon has been included in some scholarship on United States intentional communities and utopianism, but only in regards to its 1970s era and as one of many examples, rather than a

[1] *Deadly Cults,* Episode 8, "Synanon," aired June 14, 2020, on Oxygen Network, https://www.oxygen.com/deadly-cults/season-2/episode-8/synanon.
[2] Matt Novak, "Synanon's Sober Utopia: How a Drug Rehab Program Became a Violent Cult," *Gizmodo*, April 15, 2014, https://gizmodo.com/synanons-sober-utopia-how-a-drug-rehab-program-became-1562665776; Hillel Aron, "The Story of This Drug Rehab-Turned-Violent Cult is Wild, Wild Country-Caliber Bizarre," *Los Angeles,* April 23, 2018, https://lamag.com/lahistory/synanon-cult.
[3] Claire D. Clark, *The Recovery Revolution: The Battle Over Addiction Treatment in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); David F. Musto, *The American Disease: Origins of Narcotic Control,* Third Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); William L. White, *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America* (Bloomington, IL: Chestnut Health Systems, 1998.
[4] Mike Davis and Jon Wiener, *Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties* (New York: Verso: 2020) is the only book to situate Synanon in 1960s counterculture and social movements from the beginning.

subject worthy of analysis on its own.[5] In fact, when historians have discussed Synanon at all, they have written about it in ways not all that dissimilar from popular culture.

Most accounts of Synanon go something like this: In late 1950s Los Angeles, an ex-alcoholic named Charles "Chuck" Dederich had the idea to try to cure drug addicts. While it seemed to work for a while, things fell apart when Dederich became power-hungry and perhaps a little bit insane. By 1978, the same year that 918 members of Peoples' Temple died at Jonestown, Dederich had ordered his followers to stockpile guns, learn martial arts, and place a rattlesnake with the rattle cut off in the mailbox of a lawyer fighting them in court, who was almost killed by the bite. The transformation from "drug rehab" to "violent cult" was complete. In recent years, journalists have expanded the reach of Synanon's downfall, identifying it as the poisonous tree that bore toxic fruit, from "tough love" teen detention programs to exploitative court-mandated rehabilitation.[6]

Yet Synanon's story transcends the categories of "drug rehab" and "cult that have so long defined it. Founded in 1958 in Los Angeles, Synanon lasted thirty-three years, one of the longest intentional communities in U.S. history, and opened houses in San Francisco; Westport, Connecticut; Oakland; San Juan, Puerto Rico, and more. Synanon people formed common cause with Black Panthers and prison wardens, César Chávez and popular psychologist Abraham Maslow, blacklisted Hollywood screenwriters and late-night talk show hosts. They provided

---

[5] The ones that include Synanon are: Rod Janzen, *The Rise and Fall of Synanon: A California Utopia* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2001); Richard Fairfield and Timothy Miller, *The Modern Utopian: Alternative Communities of the '60s and '70s* (Process Books, 2010); Dolores Hayden, *Seven American Utopias: The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism, 1790-1975* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1979); Robert V. Hine, *California's Utopian Colonies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966). There are many more that do not.

[6] *American Rehab,* episode 2, "Miracle on the Beach," aired July 2020, https://revealnews.org/podcast/american-rehab-chapter-two-miracle-on-the-beach/; Rachel Aviv, "The Shadow Penal System for Struggling Kids," *The New Yorker*, October 11, 2021. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/10/18/the-shadow-penal-system-for-struggling-kids; Maia Szalavitz, "The Cult That Spawned the Tough-Love Teen Industry," *Mother Jones*, September/October 2007, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2007/08/cult-spawned-tough-love-teen-industry/.

legal representation for members charged with narcotics crimes, and petitioned government officials to recognize what they saw as their right to get sober on their own terms. Above all, they developed a philosophy of "getting clean" that envisioned not only personal transformation, but new ways of building community and structuring society in the postwar United States, as well.

In spite of their expansive story, Synanon is the main subject of only two historical accounts, only one of which focuses entirely on the group. That book, Rod Janzen's *The Rise and Fall of Synanon: A California Utopia,* spends scant time on Synanon's first ten years, which are almost cast as a precursor to the core "rise" years of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Synanon declared itself a "social movement" and thousands of "squares," or non-addicts, joined the community.[7] Situating Synanon within the world of utopianism and intentional communal living in late 1960s and 1970s California, Janzen hardly addresses the animating issues of addiction and sobriety that gave life to the group. While he takes the time to examine the various "lifestyle" experiments that Synanon undertook, he uncouples Synanon's ideas about how to reimagine society, economy, love, education, work, and leisure from the pursuit of getting clean, and from Synanon's roots as a commune by and for self-identified drug addicts and "dope fiends."

The second historical study of Synanon, Claire D. Clark's *The Recovery Revolution: The Battle Over Addiction Treatment in the United States,* takes a different tack. Unlike Janzen, she focuses on Synanon's early years and its work with addicts. In her telling, Dederich "saw the crumbling treatment system as ripe for disruption" and, along with Synanon residents, "marketed the organization as a radical and glamorous new form of addiction treatment."[8] Overall, Clark argues that Synanon offered "a market-based solution" for "technocratic midcentury addiction

[7] Janzen, *The Rise and Fall of Synanon.*
[8] Clark, *The Recovery Revolution*, 18.

treatment" that laid the groundwork for the privatized treatment industry that took off in the neoliberal 1970s and 1980s.[9] Clark was the first scholar to incorporate Synanon fully into the history of addiction and recovery in the twentieth-century United States, and to highlight Synanon's dramatic impact on the field of addiction treatment. However, because she frames the story of Synanon as one in which Dederich, ever the salesman, was on the hunt to start a franchise-able drug rehab business, she examines Synanon's ideas, practices, and social features mainly insofar as how they helped "sell" Synanon to onlookers.[10] Moreover, while she touches upon Synanon's links with 1960s counterculture and social movements, she does not situate Synanon within those frameworks or see them as integral to understanding the group's origins.

If historical literature is scarce, it has drawn significant attention from sociologists and psychologists. Within this body of work are two groups with very different interpretations of Synanon. The first treats Synanon as a cult whose members lived under the thumb of Dederich, mirroring the dominant narrative in popular culture. Richard Ofshe's work is seminal here, specifically his 1980 article, "The Social Development of the Synanon Cult: The Managerial Strategy of Organizational Transformation," which traces Dederich's "strategic moves… to expand, solidify and consolidate control of the group."[11] Another work along these lines is Kerwin Kaye's *Enforcing Freedom: Drug Courts, Therapeutic Communities, and the Intimacies of the State*, which argues that Synanon's coercive, disciplinary logic—conceived of and enforced by Dederich—set the stage for drug rehabilitation centers made in Synanon's image to become an arm of the criminal justice system. According to Kaye, Dederich was responsible for

[9] Clark, *Recovery Revolution,* 11.
[10] The first chapter is called "Selling Synanon," and this language persists throughout: Integration as a "selling point" (67); Synanon's "promoters" (52), how "Dederich's business plan shaped Synanon's treatment structure" (19), and so forth.
[11] Richard Ofshe, "The Social Development of the Synanon Cult: The Managerial Strategy of Organizational Transformation," *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Summer 1980), 109-127.

creating a "mechanism of surveillance… [that] moved beyond and greatly multiplied the power of the system envisioned within Jeremy Bentham's panopticon" and depended on "brainwashing" the people inside of it.[12] This line of thinking about Synanon brings to mind Vivian Gornick's "Convert to the Communist Party," cited in the Prologue—people transformed into "rubber-stamped robot[s]," their participation in Synanon not the result of genuine, legitimate conviction but of manipulation and oppression.

The second group comprises work written during Synanon's formative years in the early 1960s by professionals who studied and participated in the community. These individuals believed that Synanon was a model of psychological and social health that should be emulated by others in their fields, as well as society writ large. Daniel Casriel, an addiction psychiatrist and author of *So Fair a House: The Story of Synanon*, had been "deeply pessimistic about the rehabilitation and control, much less *cure* of the addict" until he moved into Synanon in 1962.[13] After leaving, Casriel was "convinced that Synanon [held] the solution to the enigma of drug addiction," and helped found a Synanon-inspired rehabilitation center in New York City where he practiced. One of Casriel's colleagues, Lewis Yablonsky, a criminologist and faculty member at the University of California, Los Angeles, wrote *The Tunnel Back: Synanon* in 1965 after three years of extremely close contact with the group. (He even married a Synanon woman.[14]) Yablonsky argued that Synanon was a living model of an "anti-criminal society," where "people…moved from gutters, prisons, brothels, and back rooms of our society into a position of moral leadership."[15] Both Casriel and Yablonsky also thought of Synanon as a "movement," led

[12] Kerwin Kaye, *Enforcing Freedom: Drug Courts, Therapeutic Communities, and the Intimacies of the State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 98; 88.
[13] Daniel Casriel, M.D., *So Fair A House: The Story of Synanon* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall: 1963), 3.
[14] William Yardley, "Lewis Yablonsky, 89, Sociologist Who Learned From the Streets, Is Dead," March 1, 2014, *The New York Times*.
[15] Lewis Yablonsky, *The Tunnel Back: Synanon* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. viii.

in thought and practice by Dederich, whose reach expanded beyond the realm of addiction to solve social ills like racial segregation, soulless bureaucracy, and spiritual stagnation.[16] These men were, in a sense, court scholars; they deeply admired Synanon and Dederich and had no pretense of objectivity while writing about either. However, their closeness allowed them to pick up on a core feature of Synanon that more recent scholarship has not: how Synanon people, from the group's earliest days, believed that their philosophy of getting clean had something valuable to say about new ways of living and structuring society in the postwar United States.

There are two major blind spots in the existing literature on Synanon. First, all authors treat Synanon as basically Dederich's creation. Scholars differ on why he created it—for power or money, or because he was a genuine social revolutionary—but they still attribute Synanon's existence almost entirely to his personality, ideas, and ambitions. As such, Synanon has come to be equated with Dederich, while the tens of thousands of people who, at one point or another, joined Synanon—to say nothing of the forty-something people who were there at the very beginning, scrounging up food and hammering walls and devising new group rituals—are relegated to the background. Second, there has not been any in-depth historical work on Synanon's origins and early years. This blind spot is partially as a consequence of the first, for if Dederich created Synanon, then not much more than Dederich and his process of invention need to be studied. But if one shifts focus away from Dederich, the world that gave rise to Synanon comes into view, opening new lines of inquiry along the way.

In this dissertation, I proceed from the premise that Synanon resonated with its members not primarily because of the personality of its leader, but because of the personal problems and social

[16] Casriel, *So Fair A House,* p. iv; Yablonsky, *The Tunnel Back*, viii-ix.

ills that it addressed, and the solutions it provided. I examine why so many self-identified drug addicts found meaning and community in Synanon, and how Synanon people challenged the prevailing mid-twentieth-century consensus around excluding addicts from mainstream and free society.[17] I concentrate on the group's formative years, spanning from 1958, when Synanon first emerged as a cohesive commune oriented around getting clean and experimental living, to 1965, when the group moved its core base of operations to the Bay Area and just before it began incorporating non-addicts more fully into the movement. I also analyze Synanon's complicated relationship to postwar Los Angeles; the city's proto-countercultural scene nourished the group, but its centers of establishment power—police department, municipal officials, and economic elites—pursued policies of strict racial and social stratification that nearly quashed Synanon for good.[18] In so doing, I explore a number of topics on which Synanon sheds light: how government

[17] I should pause here to explain why and how I use the word "addict" in this dissertation. (I use the term "dope fiend," too, but only in direct quotes.) Many historians of drugs, alcohol, and addiction choose not to use the term "addict," a word which, once applied to a person by authorities, has justified arrest, surveillance, incarceration, and forced hospitalization. Often, they are working from documents that have been written by intermediaries with power over the people being labeled addicts, like clinicians in mental hospitals or police officers. As such, they will use a term like "illicit drug user/s" to emphasize that they do not know the particulars of their subject's relationship with drugs, regardless of what authorities have concluded. I wholeheartedly agree with this approach, but after much thought, I have decided to go a different direction, given the historical actors at play. The people I study called themselves addicts, and felt that it was an accurate descriptor of their condition. Synanon people also deliberately decided to adopt the labels of "drug addicts, "dope fiends," "ex-addicts," and "ex-dope fiends" (used somewhat interchangeably, depending on what aspect of their past or present they wanted to emphasize) as an important marker of their identity. They were directly affected by the stigma and coercive power of the "addict" label, yet they also imbued the term with another type of power and purpose—one that gave them authority over their own bodies and Synanon with credibility and legitimacy. They also made fun of it and played around with it, cutting through the deadly seriousness it had acquired in mainstream society. In short, I use the term because they did, and with such levity, malleability, and complexity.

[18] For sources on the city's proto-countercultural and experimental scene, see: Sarah Schrank, *Art and the City: Civic Imagination and Cultural Authority in Los Angeles* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Alison Rose Jefferson, "African American Leisure Space in Santa Monica: The Beach Sometimes Known As the "Inkwell," 1900s-1960s," *Southern California Quarterly,* Summer 2009, Vol. 91, No. 2 (Summer 2009), pp. 155-189; Elsa Devienne, "Urban Renewal by the Sea: Reinventing the Beach for the Suburban Age in Postwar Los Angeles," *Journal of Urban History* 2919, Vol. 45(1), 99-125; Davis, *Set the Night on Fire*; Anthony Macías, "Bringing Music to the People: Race, Urban Culture, and Municipal Politics in Postwar Los Angeles," *American Quarterly*, 56, no. 3 (2004), 693-717; John Arthur Maynard, *Venice West: The Beat Generation in Southern California* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993); Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). For sources on racial and social stratification, and the enforcement thereof, in postwar Los Angeles, see: Josh Sides, *City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Mina Yang, "A Thin Blue Line down Central Avenue:

officials treated people deemed addicts and the dominant frame through which they conceptualized addiction; how postwar Los Angeles fostered the rapid growth of a diverse grassroots recovery movement that sidelined medical expertise and developed their own ideas about addiction and sobriety; and how drug addicts forged an autonomous social structure predicated on radical belonging, challenging the lines of inclusion and exclusion in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. Within these broader narratives lies the resonance of Synanon for the people who were drawn to its doors and devoted themselves to shaping and sustaining it.

This approach makes it possible to intervene in historical literature beyond that discussing Synanon itself. First, the story of Synanon's formative years in the late 1950s and early 1960s shows how much is obscured by the dominant analytic framework that divides twentieth-century approaches to addiction into the categories of medicalization or criminalization. Of course, scholars have long challenged the idea that there is a clear-cut distinction between medical and criminal realms, tracing how medical knowledge about addiction has served the purposes of criminalization since the earliest Progressive-era narcotics prohibitions.[19] Historians have also shown how criminal models remained the dominant mode of response to Black and Latinx illicit drug users, while white users were framed as victims of public health crises.[20] Scholars have also

---

The LAPD and the Demise of a Musical Hub," *Black Music Research Journal*, 22, no. 2 (2002), 217-239; Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, (New York: Verso, 2006); Matthew Lassiter, "Pushers, Victims, and the Lost Innocence of White Suburbia: California's War on Narcotics during the 1950s," *Journal of Urban History*, 41, no. 5 (2015), 787-807; Alisa Sarah Kramer, "William H. Parker and the Thin Blue Line: Politics, Public Relations and Policing in Postwar Los Angeles." Ph.D. dissertation. American University, 2007; Edward J. Escobar, *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity: Mexican Americans and the Los Angeles Police Department, 1900-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). For a book on the wild changes wrought unto postwar California, see Carey McWilliams, *California: The Great Exception* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

[19] Nancy D. Campbell, *Discovering Addiction: The Science and Politics of Substance Abuse Research* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007); Caroline J. Acker, *Creating the American Junkie: Addiction in the Classic Era of Narcotic Control* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

[20] Matthew D. Lassiter, "Impossible Criminals: The Suburban Imperatives of America's War on Drugs," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 102, No. 1, June 2015, 126–140; Julilly Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017). (Scholars of race and

demonstrated how treatment programs that position themselves in opposition to carceral facilities are often shot through with coercion and punishment, and even rely on the criminal justice system for patients.[21] However, for all that scholars have done to examine the complex, intermingled relationship between medical and criminal approaches, they still tend to invoke these categories as the primary means of analysis.

Synanon arose during an era in which government officials simultaneously called for a "war on drugs" and addiction treatment, and public health officials worked hand in hand with law enforcement in the name of "treatment and control."[22] The people who made up Synanon did not see much daylight between medical and criminal approaches. They noticed how they both shared a similar logic—based on the perceived need to isolate the individual—that resulted in institutional confinement. Synanon offered something strikingly different. It did not treat addiction as a crime or a moral failing, but neither did it apply a medical paradigm to the problem. Instead, Synanon people saw addiction as something that alienated the individual from their creative potential and social purpose. The way forward, given that they lived in a society that ostracized and confined addicts, was to build a new social world for themselves, where they were in charge of their present and future. A close analysis of Synanon, then, opens up the possibility of new, more illuminating analytic frameworks: confinement and separation versus

---

criminal justice like Elizabeth Hinton, Michelle Alexander, and Naomi Murakawa have also detailed the specifics of the criminalization frame, though they do not comment explicitly on the medicalization frame.)

[21] Kaye, *Enforcing Freedom*; Clark, *The Recovery Revolution*; Teresa Gowan and Sarah Whetstone, "Making the criminal addict: Subjectivity and social control in a strong-arm rehab," *Punishment and Society* 14(1), 2012, 69-93. Kaye and Clark also trace back the coercive elements in therapeutic communities to Synanon itself.

[22] This insight on the simultaneity of medical and criminal approaches builds on the work of Samuel Roberts, "'Rehabilitation' as Boundary Object: Medicalization, Local Activism, and Narcotics Addiction Policy in New York City, 1951-62," *The Social History of Alcohol and Drugs,* Vol. 26, no. 2 (2012), 147-169; and Eric Schneider, *Smack: Heroin and the American City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

social integration and community; professional expertise versus the authority of addicts and former addicts; state involvement in recovery efforts versus reliance on mutual aid endeavors.

Second, studying Synanon through the lens of people drawn to it reveals the existence of an eclectic mutual aid recovery scene that is at odds with the dominant narrative about Alcoholics Anonymous and its entry into the social mainstream during the late 1940s and 1950s. A key argument of that literature maintains that postwar AA saw sobriety as a ticket back to middle-class respectability, and a specifically masculine one at that—the steady job, the suburban home, the wife and kids.[23] The 12-Step recovery movement that AA spawned has also been read as fundamentally conservative; scholars like Eva Moskowitz argue that 12-Step groups aligned with the neoliberal turn, in how their approach individualizes problems and solutions instead of pushing for social change.[24] At the same time, the scholarship focusing on specific mutual aid recovery groups outside of AA—as opposed to the broader category of "self-help" or "12-Step" groups—is small and quite disconnected from other historical literatures.[25] This tendency to

[23] Lori Rotskoff, *Love on the Rocks: Men, Women, and Alcohol in Post-World War II America,* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Elayne Rapping, *The Culture of Recovery: Making Sense of the Self-Help Movement in Women's Lives* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Robin Room, "Alcoholism and Alcoholics Anonymous in U.S. Films, 1945-1962: The Party Ends for the 'Wet Generations,'" *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 50, no. 4 (1989), 368-381; Trysh Travis, *The Language of the Heart: A Cultural History of the Recovery Movement from Alcoholics Anonymous to Oprah Winfrey* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013).Notable exceptions come from outside the historical profession: Don Lattin, *Distilled Spirits: Getting High, Then Sober, With a Famous Writer, A Forgotten Philosopher, and a Hopeless Drunk* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012) on Bill Wilson's friendships with Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard, Lewis Hyde, *The Gift*: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World (New York: Vintage Books, 2007).

[24] Stanton Peele, *The Diseasing of America: Addiction Treatment out of Control* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989); Wendy Kaminer, *'I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional': The Recovery Movement and Other Self-Help Fashions* (New York: Vintage, 1993); Eva Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust: America's Obsession with Self-Fulfillment* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2001); Craig Twelve-Step Movements and Advanced Capitalist Culture: On the Politics of Self Control in Postmodernity," in *Social Movements and Cultural Politics,* Marcy Darnovsky, Barbara Epstein, and Richard Flacks, eds. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995; Rapping, *Culture of Recovery.*

[25] William White is almost single-handedly keeping the field alive. See White, *Slaying the Dragon;* William White, Chris Budnick, and Boyd Pickard, "Narcotics Anonymous: Its History and Culture" (2011), *Counselor,* Vol. 12, No. 2, 3. Otherwise, the task has fallen to member-historians. See Bob Stone, *My Years with Narcotics Anonymous* (Hulon Pendleton Publishing, 1997).

overlook non-AA groups—like Synanon, but also Narcotics Anonymous (NA)—combined with scholars' emphasis on AA as an organization chasing mainstream respectability has obscured the existence of more experimental and radical recovery subcultures.

Close study of Synanon's early years uncovers the existence of what I call recovery countercultures that existed within and beyond the burgeoning AA movement in postwar Los Angeles.[26] Within these spaces, addicts pursued alternative ways of "getting clean" that challenged the era's consensus on institutional confinement. Synanon was not an anomaly or fringe endeavor, but one of several groups in the late 1950s and early 1960s Los Angeles pushing the boundaries of mainstream AA. Drug addicts and AA members joined together in chapters that they considered part of the AA movement even if the national organization did not. AA members created informal chapters and communal living arrangements that cultivated experimentation with cutting-edge psychological techniques and LSD trials, to which their local, more traditional chapters objected. These hybrid addict-alcoholic groups and spin-off AA groups flowered

[26] I use the term "counterculture" specifically in relation to the mainstream culture of AA, but also as a gesture to how Synanon's philosophy, practices, and community presaged much of the 1960s and 1970s counterculture: the rise of intentional communities that experimented with alternative social, economic, and domestic forms; the intertwining of ideas from humanist psychology—which formed the basis of the era's human potential movement—that emphasized the importance of self-actualization, and the possibility of nonconformists being the truly healthy people in a sick society; the breaking of social and legal taboos regarding sex and drugs, as well as dissent and public space, (or in Synanon's case, drug addicts and where they belonged); even early experimentation with LSD. For the former, regarding a specifically "recovery" counterculture, see Don Lattin, *Distilled Spirits.* For the latter, regarding 1960s-1970s counterculture which Synanon presaged, see: Jessica Grogan, *Encountering America: Humanistic Psychology, Sixties Culture, and the Shaping of the Modern Self* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013); Damon Bach, *The American Counterculture: A History of Hippies and Cultural Dissidents* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2020); Camille Paglia, "Cults and Cosmic Consciousness: Religious Vision in the American 1960s," *Arion* 10, no. 3 (2003), 57-111; Timothy Miller, "The Roots of the 1960s Communal Revival." *American Studies,* 33, no. 2 (1992), 73-93; Risa Goluboff, *Vagrant Nation: Public Power, Constitutional Change, and the Making of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Don Lattin, *The Harvard Psychedelic Club: How Timothy Leary, Ram Dass, Huston Smith, and Andrew Weil Killed the Fifties and Ushered in a New Age for America* (New York: HarperOne, 2011); Davis, *Set the Night on Fire.*

especially in Venice Beach-Ocean Park, a racially and socio-economically diverse area that was home to the city's Beat scene and nonconformists of many stripes.[27]

Synanon grew directly out of this scene, and then beyond it. By the mid-1960s, it had charted a more audacious and public path as an integrated, mixed-sex commune of self-identified "dope fiends" who saw the pursuit of sobriety as an opportunity to forge different ways of living in the postwar United States, and who demanded the right to live in free society on their own terms, in accordance with their own principles and practices. In the process, Synanon people created a living alternative to the institutional consensus and challenged the logic undergirding it that wrote addicts out of the social fabric. They insisted on their own essential dignity and demanded that their desire to determine their own futures—with respect to getting clean and governing their community—be respected.[28] In this respect, Synanon presaged the emphasis on autonomy and self-determination in movements for radical participatory democracy in the mid-late 1960s and 1970s, from Black Power to women's liberation.[29]

The four chapters in this dissertation are organized around four key themes: social movements, state power, place, and dissent and nonconformity. The first, social movements, cuts a couple of ways. I argue that Synanon must be situated with the larger, multifaceted mutual aid recovery movement that grew around AA in postwar Los Angeles, and I also approach Synanon

---

[27] Shrank, *Art and the City;* Davis, *Set the Night on Fire;* Devienne, "Urban Renewal by the Sea."
[28] I am building off Luis Alvarez in their thinking about the fight for dignity as a type of politics; politics as not just being about a specific legislative goal or other formal means, but the struggle for dignity waged by people denied it, people degraded and dismissed. They also write about the real power gained by reclaiming dignity. See: Luis Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
[29] Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Sandra Morgan, *Into Our Own Hands: The Women's Health Movement in the United States, 1969-1990*. New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2002; Alyosha Goldstein, *Poverty in Common: The Politics of Community Action During the American Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Donna Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

as an incipient social movement in itself. By that, I mean that I attribute Synanon's existence to specific social conditions that drove addicts to make latent and explicit critiques of the status quo. The second, state power, focuses on a key aspect of those conditions that animated Synanon—specifically, the consensus around institutional confinement of addicts that defined mid-twentieth century policy on federal, state, and local levels. I dig into the conceptual logic and practical implementation of the institutional consensus, as well as examine how government officials responded to Synanon. The third, place, provides a way to talk about setting and social belonging, and how different environments can open up new worlds and futures for the people who live within them, or how they can close them, make them seem impossible. I also try to shed light on how Synanon people experienced places on an everyday level, an approach that drove home the limitations of using medical and criminal frameworks for making sense of both Synanon and the institutions for which it offered an alternative. The fourth and final theme, dissent and nonconformity, highlights the aspects of Synanon and Synanon people that have been ignored most frequently—the stark challenge they posed to the dominant ideas and policies around addiction in the postwar United States, and the commitment to exploring experimental, often controversial, ways of getting clean and organizing social life that underpinned Synanon's existence from the beginning.

Chapter 1:

"No Place to Go:" Addiction Treatment, Institutional Confinement, and Synanon as Alternative, 1945-1961

When thirty-seven-year-old Betty Beckham walked into Synanon's clubhouse in July 1959, she had been addicted to heroin for eight years. During that time, she was sentenced to jail three times and committed to a federal hospital-prison and a state mental hospital for addiction treatment. Every time she left one of those institutions, she went back to using heroin. She wanted to stop, but quitting did not really seem possible. Institutional treatment was supposed to be the gold standard for a cure to addiction, but medical professionals had not been able to cure her. In fact, when she first heard about "a little place down on the beach called Synanon," where "addicts were trying to help themselves," she worried that it was a trap.[1] She might show up, expecting "something new," and instead be funneled into "another kind of hospital or some kind of treatment center, clinic, or something."[2]

Instead, Beckham experienced something completely unfamiliar: a clubhouse on the boardwalk, lit by flickering candles, where men and women were sitting on "ragged couches" and bare mattresses and "quoting concepts and books" to each other." It was a "weird scene," nothing like she had anticipated, and Beckham decided to return home that night.[3] But the next morning, she came back and started to kick heroin. As she lay on one of the "ragged couches," she watched as Synanon people went about their business, occasionally checking in on her. "I

[1] "Bettye Coleman," *Seven Voices of Synanon: oral history transcript*, Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, 1964, 41. Throughout this chapter, I will use Betty's birth name, Beckham, instead of Coleman, which was the last name of her second husband and one she stopped using after this oral history had been published. She also went by "Betty" more regularly than "Bettye."
[2] "Interview #1 with Betty D, Transcript Copy," Box 41, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA Synanon Collection (UCLA Synanon).
[3] "Bettye Coleman," *Seven Voices of Synanon,* 41-42.

was sick as a dog," Beckham recalled, "I was going through the usual withdrawal symptoms, but I was just fascinated."[4] She had never seen people try to get clean this way before—no bars or corrections officers, no physicians or psychiatrists, just forty-something self-identified "dope fiends" hanging out, reading, debating and discussing everything under the sun, living together side by side throughout it all. After a few weeks of living in Synanon, Beckham felt something "gut level," something new: "I knew that if I wanted to, there was something I could do about this problem [of addiction]." There was one time before, when she was hospitalized in a federal narcotics farm in Lexington, Kentucky, that Beckham experienced "a faint glimmer" of this realization. But it had no staying power, for she was "locked up five thousand miles from home and behind big red brick walls." Synanon, on the other hand, "was a free thing," a place where "the door was opened."[5]



Figure 2: Betty Beckham, circa 1961.

[4] "Interview #1 with Betty D, Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon.
[5] "Bettye Coleman," *Seven Voices of Synanon,* 46.

Why did Synanon inspire such surprise and fascination in Beckham? How did she conceptualize the differences between Synanon and other places she had tried to get clean, or been sentenced to because she was an addict? Scholarly narratives identify the late 1940s and mid-1950s as a peak of law enforcement approaches to illicit narcotics and addiction which gave way to a "medical turn" in the late 1950s and 1960s that started to emphasize treatment over punishment.[6] Synanon has not been seen as a key part of that story. If mentioned at all, Synanon has typically been placed on the side of "treatment" as an example of an early ex-addict-led drug rehabilitation center.[7] A few more recent accounts have also argued that Synanon actually laid the groundwork for court-ordered drug rehabilitation centers to act as an arm of the criminal justice system.[8] Yet Beckham's analysis does not align with either of those assessments. Synanon appealed to her precisely because it did *not* medicalize addiction. She was most suspicious of Synanon when she thought that it was a medical facility—another "hospital or some kind of treatment center, clinic, or something." Only when she concluded that it was not, did she start to let her guard down. Moreover, Beckham saw Synanon as a "free thing," and the total opposite of the places where she had been "locked up," which included jails and hospitals. For Beckham, a place was not more trustworthy because it provided (or claimed to provide) medical care, nor was it necessarily less coercive or compulsory. The key distinction in her mind was whether a place confined her and compelled her to be sober, or whether it invited her into a

[6] David Courtwright, *Dark Paradise: A History of Opiate Addiction in America.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001; Courtwright, Herman Joseph, Don Des Jarlais, *Addicts Who Survived: An Oral History of Narcotic Use in America before 1965* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989); H. Wayne Morgan, *Drugs in America: A Social History, 1800-1980* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1981); Musto, *The American Disease.*
[7] Clark, *The Recovery Revolution;* William White, *Slaying the Dragon;* Musto, *The American Disease*.
[8] Kaye, *Enforcing Freedom; American Rehab,* Reveal.

community, housed in a former grocery on a busy beach boardwalk, where she could choose to get sober or not.

This chapter posits an alternative framework for understanding mid-twentieth century state responses to addiction, and argues that Synanon's appeal lay within its implicit rejection of the dominant model. The era was marked not by a stark divide between carceral and medical solutions, but an institutional consensus that used both approaches to remove people whom authorities judged as addicts from free society. Only by moving past the false binary of treatment and punishment does it become clear what Synanon represented to the addicts who arrived there: an implicit rejection of institutional treatment backed by state force, which had shaped their lives but had not succeeded in getting them off drugs. Intrigued and somewhat skeptical, they made their way to Synanon to try out the group's animating principle: that addicts could gather together and help each other get clean of their own free will, in the middle of free society.

The Institutional Consensus

"Typhoid Mary": The Addict as Threat to Public Health and Safety

Even at the height of first War on Drugs in the 1950s, it would have been difficult to find a government official arguing that drug addicts should be punished with imprisonment simply for being addicts. It would have been easy, however, to find authorities expressing pity for addicts and calling for expanded access to treatment. This was especially true in California, a locus of the nation's so-called "narcotics problem" during the postwar years. During the 1950s, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department lobbied state lawmakers to transfer addict cases out of jails and into a treatment facility, while the California Department of Corrections (CA DOC) actively opposed legislation that would increase the length of prison sentences for low-level drug

offenders, which often included addicts and/or illicit drug users. Neither California's law enforcement officials nor its public health authorities thought that jails and prisons were the best places for addicts to be housed, though they did believe that addicts should be isolated from society in a controlled setting: compulsory addiction treatment in government-run medical facilities. They supported this form of institutional confinement on the basis that drug addicts posed an urgent public threat because they were sick people infected with a seemingly intractable and vicious disease.[9]

The early twentieth century saw the creation of a conceptual divide between consumers of prescription pharmaceutical drugs and addicts who used illicit narcotics, marking the latter as a different type of medical subject.[10] Federal lawmakers passed Progressive-era narcotics prohibitions to target whom they believed were the majority of the era's addict population: "medical addicts," or "accidental addicts," who had been introduced to opiates by licensed doctors and pharmacists. By the 1920s, heroin addicts were no longer considered patients led astray by overprescribing, but social deviants so beholden to their pathological craving that they broke the law. In reality, the line between "accidental" and "criminal" addicts was never as distinct as lawmakers said it was. Regardless, as historian Caroline Acker has shown, the American "junkie" had become a psychiatric subject whose physical dependence on heroin indicated the presence of a deeper mental disorder.[11] For instance, the influential psychiatrist and public health official Dr. Lawrence Kolb argued in 1925 that mentally "stable" people did not

[9] Drug addiction is just one expression of the potential for public health imperatives to serve as justification for the exclusion of certain groups, often racialized ones, from the American body politic. For a Los Angeles-specific articulation of this argument, see Natalia Molina, *Fit to Be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2006).
[10] Courtwright, *Dark Paradise;* David Herzberg, *White Market Drugs: Big Pharma and the Hidden History of Addiction in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020).
[11] Acker, *Creating the American Junkie*.

feel pleasure when they ingested heroin; only individuals with a pre-existing mental disturbance would feel the drug's euphoric effects and continue to seek it out, thereby becoming addicts.[12]

Government officials first pursued institutional confinement for drug addicts on the grounds that they should be isolated from society and given psychiatric treatment. These policies were not passed in the name of punishment, but were justified on the grounds of ensuring access to a more modern, humane form of confinement: hospitals instead of prisons. In 1929, Congress passed the Porter Narcotic Farm Act to fund the construction of two federal treatment facilities for addicts. Supporters praised the bill as a sign of "public enlightenment" on the addiction issue, motivated by the realization that "these unfortunates [needed] to be scientifically treated and segregated from ordinary criminals."[13] On the presumption that federal legislation had generally solved the nation's "medical addict" problem, they seemed to expect that the number of "unfortunates" requiring treatment would be relatively small. The two institutions opened in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1935, and Fort Worth, Texas, in 1938, with a total capacity of 2,162 beds—1,400 at Lexington and 762 at Fort Worth. By 1953, the facilities grew slightly to a total of 2,414 beds.[14] They operated under the dual governance of the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) and the federal Bureau of Prisons. The former agency was responsible for providing

---

[12] Kolb was the first chief medical officer of the federal narcotics hospital-prison in Lexington, Kentucky (1934-1938) and director of the U.S. Public Health Service's Division of Mental Hygiene (1938-1944). Earlier in his career, Kolb served at Ellis Island from 1913-1919, conducting examinations on newly-arrived immigrants to determine if they were mentally fit to be allowed entry to the United States. For Kolb's work on heroin and pleasure, see "Pleasure and Deterioration from Narcotic Addiction," *Mental Hygiene* 9 (October 1925)..

[13] "Establishment of Two Federal Narcotic Farms," 70th Congress, 14 (1928). A large part of the support for the Porter Act came from federal prison wardens, who did not want addicts in their facilities. More addicted inmates entered into prisons as a result of the Progressive-era narcotics prohibitions. Wardens complained that they constantly smuggled narcotics into their facilities which forced crackdowns on the entire inmate population, making them more hostile and restless. They also argued that addicts should not be incarcerated but treated in separate facilities. For more on how the federal narcotic farms were seen as evidence of "public enlightenment," see Nancy Campbell, "'A new deal for the drug addict': The Addiction Research Center, Lexington, Kentucky," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences,* Vol. 42, No. 2 (April 2006), 135-157.

[14] *Department of Labor – Federal Security Agency Appropriations for 1954: Part 2: Federal Security Agency,"* 83rd Congress, 1953 (statement of Dr. G. Halsey Hunt, Assistant Surgeon General of U.S. Public Health Service), 922.

cutting-edge medical and psychiatric treatment. The latter ensured the facilities' security, since they would be populated mostly by federal prisoners whom judges, juries, and/or prison wardens had identified as addicts.

In the decade following World War II, the institutional treatment model faced its first real test as the "narcotics problem" exploded into public consciousness.[15] From the mid-1930s to the early 1940s, the federal facilities did not operate at full capacity; Fort Worth had enough empty beds that the U.S. military used it as a hospital for servicemen suffering from neuropsychiatric issues.[16] Yet after the war, there was a "marked rise" in narcotic admissions, according to the USPHS Assistant Surgeon General.[17] By 1951, Lexington had a waiting list of two hundred and approximately 5,600 patients expected to enter its doors in 1952.[18] This surge occurred in the midst of a postwar panic over youthful narcotics use. Popular magazines nationalized fears of a supposedly mushrooming teenage heroin "epidemic" with articles like *Life*'s 1951 "Children in Peril."[19] The scale of the issue was exaggerated, though the issue itself was not completely fanciful. USPHS officials reported that they "were faced with so many applicants, especially

[15] Schneider, *Smack*; Kathleen J. Frydl, *The Drug Wars in America, 1940-1973* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Both authors explore how the postwar narcotics problem was constructed and racialized by the media, while also describing something real, at least partially, and in a relative sense. Heroin availability really did increase in the years immediately following World War II; global shipping and smuggling routes that had been shut down during the war were now open and bustling. However, law enforcement targeted Black and Latinx (specifically Mexican American in Los Angeles and greater California and Puerto Rican in New York City) urban residents, who were disproportionately arrested and incarcerated though they did not use drugs in greater quantities than whites. Moreover, popular perception of the "narcotics problem" collapsed disparate things into a single threat: marijuana and heroin were both called "dope," and both led to degradation and intractable addiction, which contemporaries did not distinguish from general use of illicit drugs, either.

[16] *First Deficiency Appropriation Bill, February 1945, Committee on Appropriations*, 79th Congress, 1945 (statement of Dr. Robert Felix), 366.

[17] *Department of Labor -- Federal Security Agency Appropriations for 1952. Federal Security Agency, Part 2: Public Health Service*, 82nd Congress, 1951 (statement of Dr. G. Halsey Hunt, Chief of PHS Division of Hospitals), 708.

[18] Hunt, Testimony *Department of Labor*, 707-727.

[19] Bennett, Alexander S, "The Discovery and Treatment of Juvenile Drug Use in Post-World War II Los Angeles," Ph.D. dissertation, Carnegie Mellon University, 2009, 3-4. Bennett cites Newsweek articles from 1949 and 1950, and Life's "Children In Peril" (1950).

from the teenagers, that [they] had to establish a policy to give them preference for the available beds."[20] Originally, these institutions were supposed to confine and treat a small, declining number of addicts. Two decades later, however, the problem seemed only to have grown in size and scope, with no clear end in sight.

To explain this apparent rise, law enforcement and medical professionals compared drug addiction to a contagious disease.[21] "If a person learns about drugs and begins their use as a result of association with addicts," a high-ranking USPHS official said in 1951, "addiction is much more likely to occur… This is another way of saying that addiction, like a contagious disease, spreads from person to person."[22] The threat of contagion was embodied in the individual addict, who was, according to a federal narcotics agent in 1952, bound to create "four or five [more addicts] in his lifetime" as a "rule of thumb."[23] When contrasted to the disease concept of mental illness, the framework of contagion was frightening in its catchability. Psychopathy was not communicable, but if addiction functioned like syphilis or leprosy, then it endangered anybody who came into contact with a drug addict—even if they were a law-abiding citizen.

The discourse likening addiction to a contagious disease was racialized, especially in post-World War II California where demographic change had unsettled white Angelenos' sense

[20] Hunt, Testimony *Department of Labor*, 727.
[21] See Lassiter, "Pushers, Victims, and the Lost Innocence of White Suburbia," and Susan Speaker, "'The Struggle of Mankind Against its Deadliest Foe': Themes of Counter-Subversion in Anti-Narcotic Campaigns, 1920-1950," *Journal of Social History,* Vol 34, No. 3 (March 2001), 591-610.
[22] Dr. Harris Isbell, Director of Research, Public Health Service Hospital in Lexington, Kentucky, quoted in *Transcript of Proceedings of the Subcommittee on Narcotics*, Assembly Interim Committee on Judiciary, California Legislature, 1954, 44.
[23] "Treasury and Post Office Departments Appropriations," 82nd Congress, 1952, (Testimony of George W. Cunningham), 304.

of acceptable racial and ethnic boundaries.[24] As historian Matthew Lassiter has argued, white Angelenos assumed that addiction went *from* Black and brown residents *to* white ones, a belief that overlapped with deeper anxieties about racial integration.[25] Over the 1940s, Black migrants moving west made up one of every three arrivals to Los Angeles, but they were excluded from more than ninety percent of the city's housing supply.[26] The number of Mexican Angelenos also increased during the 1940s and 1950s after declining in the 1930s as a result of Depression-era xenophobia.[27] By the mid-1940s, Black and Mexican Angelenos were challenging residential racial segregation in the courts.[28] Interracial spaces for entertainment were popular during the 1940s and 1950s, from music venues along Central Avenue, the hub of Black nightlife in Los Angeles, to ballrooms and dance halls across the city.[29] Municipal campaigns to enforce racial segregation followed, leading to law enforcement crackdowns on venues known for interracial socializing, as well as Black and Mexican neighborhoods, which police often justified on the grounds of narcotics enforcement.[30] The 1952 annual report of the Los Angeles Police Department [LAPD] framed their anti-narcotics campaigns as efforts to contain the social threat of contagion: "[Addiction] is contagious—it spreads from person to person… If the spread of this disease-like vice is not controlled, it will multiply at a frightening rate, infecting all age

[24] Sides, *L.A. City Limits*; Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*; Widener, *Black Arts West;* Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
[25] Lassiter, "Pushers, Victims, and the Lost Innocence of White Suburbia," and "Impossible Criminals."
[26] Widener, *Black Arts West*, 57.
[27] Though the U.S. Census did not include Mexican Americans as a category in 1940 or 1950, historians have managed to make some educated estimations. According to a study led by historian Becky Nicolaides and ConsultingGPA, Los Angeles experienced its first decrease in Mexican American and Mexican populations when California spearheaded a "repatriation" campaign that deported U.S. citizens and undocumented residents alike. In 1942, millions of Mexicans and Mexican Americans re/entered Los Angeles and California through the Bracero program, reversing the downward trend of the 1930s. For more on this topic, see Becky Nicolaides and Consulting GPA, "SurveyLA: Latino Los Angeles Historic Context Statement," City of Los Angeles, Department of City Planning, Office of Historic Resources, September 15, 2015.
[28] Josh Sides, *LA City Limits*, Carey McWilliams, "The Evolution of Sugar Hill," *Script*, March 1949.
[29] Macías, "Bringing Music to the People."
[30] Widener, *Black Arts West*, 57.

groups, social levels, and races."[31] In 1958, California state officials concluded that the breeding grounds for addiction were "ethnically mixed" neighborhoods that had "rented living facilities" and a high rate of "broken and/or unstable homes."[32] The "spread" of addiction supposedly emanated from Black and brown places, which would have to be "controlled," while white, racially homogeneous, middle- and upper-class spaces needed protection from infection. The language of contagion could be completely detached from an epidemiological basis and instead used as a euphemism for the threat of racial integration.

The mid-twentieth-century disease concept of addiction defined the drug addict as a unique mixture of victim and threat. While they suffered from their illness, they were also bound to infect others. Moreover, they had a mental pathology that made them run afoul of social norms and laws. If addicts were able to move about society unchecked, who knew that they might be capable of? In 1947, when police officers in a beachfront community of Los Angeles were stumped by the fatal stabbing of a fifteen-year-old girl, they speculated to the local newspaper that it must have been the work of "a sadist or a 'hopped up' narcotic addict."[33] The officers drew a parallel between the two groups because both, presumably, had the capacity to do terrible things for no discernible reason. Public intellectuals of the postwar era emphasized that addicts were far more likely to engage in petty theft than commit violent crimes, but much of the U.S.

[31] Los Angeles Police Department, *Annual Report,* 1952, cited in Mina Yang, "A Thin Blue Line down Central Avenue," 230.
[32] A 1958 report produced by the California Department of Corrections asserted that addiction flourished in "ethnically mixed depressed neighborhoods"—as well as "rented living facilities," and "broken and/or unstable homes. See "The Narcotic Offender: A Survey of Narcotic Involvement of Confinees in State Correctional Institutions," June 1958, 1, Folder F3717:206, Special Study Commission Records, Department of Corrections Records, California State Archives, Sacramento, CA (CDC-CSA).
[33] "Motive Sought in Fatal Knifing of Schoolgirl," October 3, 1947, *Los Angeles Times*, I4.

public was not so sure.[34] They were afraid of what "hopped up" addicts might do in their search for more drugs.

The particularities of addicts' disease meant that they followed the command of their craving instead of law or conventional morality. Withdrawal was the primary feature of the clinical definition of addiction. According to the CA DOC in 1958, addicts were addicts because they experienced symptoms of withdrawal—chills, runny nose, diarrhea, and vomiting, among others—and sought out drugs "for the conscious purpose of alleviating withdrawal distress."[35] Public health and criminal justice officials alike agreed that addicts were most likely to engage in criminal activity during this stage of his disease. In order to avoid "withdrawal distress," they might steal a purse, rob a drug store, forge a doctor's prescription note, or turn to sex work. Even a young person with no criminal record could fall into the downward spiral once they were addicted. "Someone suggests that it is the smart and daring thing to try heroin," a top USPHS official warned in 1951, "[and] the boys will steal and the girls go into prostitution in order to get money to get the drug, or they will get sick from withdrawal."[36] According to postwar authorities, it was due to the addicts' sickness that they behaved in deviant, dangerous ways.

The supposed horrors of withdrawal penetrated popular culture in the 1950s. Comic books depicted the dehumanizing consequences of addiction as inevitable, and detailed how

[34] For examples of postwar scholarship debunking the notion that drug addicts were violent criminals, see: Alfred Lindesmith, *Opiate Addiction* (Principia Press: Bloomington, Indiana, 1947); Lawrence Kolb, "Let's Stop This Narcotics Hysteria," *Saturday Evening Post*, July 28, 1956, p. 19; William Butler Eldridge, "Myths and Facts," in *The Addict,* ed. Dan Wakefield (Fawcett Publications: Greenwich, Connecticut, 1963).
[35] The California Department of Corrections defined an opiate addict as a person "who has, at any time, used an opiate, a derivative, or a synthetic equivalent for the conscious purpose of alleviating withdrawal distress." "The Narcotic Offender," CDC-CSA.
[36] "Department of Labor—Federal Security Agency Appropriations for 1952, Part 2: Public Health Service, 1951 (Testimony of Victor Vogel), 729.

addicts turned violent in their quest to avoid withdrawal pains.[37] In "The Monkey," a 1953 edition of the four-year comic book series *Shock SuspenStories*, a white, middle-class teenager named Eddie battled his heroin addiction to no avail. He had been manipulated into trying illicit drugs by a local dealer; he started with marijuana, but the "pusher" encouraged him to try amphetamines, then heroin. Eddie quickly became addicted to the latter. In an effort to control his habit, Eddie decided to stop using "cold turkey" when he was "short of cash" one day. The pain that followed was immediate:

> All night long I paced the floor of my pad as the TREMBLES began and the NAUSEA swept over me and I commuted to the bathroom and VOMITED my GUTS out and the DIARRHEA poured from me and my NERVE-ENDS burned and the MONKEY on my back began to SCRATCH and CLAW and TEAR until…

In the next square, a close-up of Eddie's face showed his neck thrown back, his veins bulging, his eyes squeezed shut in agony, sweat pouring from his face, his mouth open and howling, "YAAAAAAA!" The experience of withdrawal taught him a valuable lesson. Eddie "made up [his] mind" to "NEVER go through THAT again… I'd ALWAYS have enough dough for my fixes." He stole from his father and shoplifted from stores until his parents intervened, removing the supply of heroin stashed in his room. When Eddie came home to find his drugs gone, he snapped: "Suddenly I saw myself going through a WITHDRAWAL again and everything went white-hot before my eyes." He hit his father over the head with a lamp, then fled to a motel to meet his dealer. While waiting in the dingy room, a police officer arrived to arrest him for a murder that Eddie had not realized he had committed. "No," Eddie cried out, upon discovering his father's fate, "No! Oh, God! Get this MONKEY off my back! Oh, God!"[38] As

[37] I am building off Schneider's work in *Smack* about comics' depictions of heroin addiction. He focuses on the issue of age, juvenile delinquency, and generational divides, where I am examining comics for insight into how addiction and treatment were portrayed in popular media.
[38] "The Monkey," Al Felstein and Joe Orlando, *Shock SuspenStories*, No. 12, Dec-Jan 1953. Accessed digitally at: http://www.ep.tc/problems/29/index.html

Eddie sobbed, his head in his hands, he cast a hunched ape-like shadow on the wall. His metamorphosis into wild beast was complete. While the comic portrayed Eddie as a genuine threat to others, it also depicted him as a victim of a condition beyond his control. Addiction had turned Eddie into something wild and violent, making him commit acts he would never have done otherwise.



Figure 3: Scenes from "The Monkey," 1953.

Popular narratives like "The Monkey" aligned with the conviction of mid-twentieth century government officials that drug addicts could not be allowed to move freely in society on account of their dangerous disease. However, like their counterparts in the 1920s, they did not advocate for more addicts to be incarcerated. At least rhetorically, authorities differentiated drug addicts from "dope peddlers," for whom harsh punishment was deserved. During the 1950s, lawmakers at the California state and federal levels passed legislation that sought to punish dealers with mandatory minimum sentences.[39] Drug addicts were not the intended targets of these laws, though, in reality, they often ended up in carceral facilities as a result of them all the same.[40] This state of affairs frustrated California law enforcement officials, who argued for a different type of institutional confinement for addicts: treatment. "We must realize," the Los Angeles County Sheriff argued in 1954, "that the mere incarceration of the narcotic user… is not correcting the condition which causes or permits the narcotic user to return to narcotics after his release… It is quite apparent that there is a definite need for psychiatric, medical, and sociological conditioning before a narcotic user is a proper risk to be returned to society with the

[39] California adopted its first mandatory minimum sentencing law, Assembly Bill 2238, in 1953. It was modeled on federal narcotics legislation passed two years earlier, the Boggs Act of 1951. Both federal and California state lawmakers justified the harsh penalties as essential for deterring narcotics traffickers and street dealers. By 1959, the California legislature had more than twelve bills on the docket looking to extend mandatory sentences to all first-time drug offenders, with one permitting juries to sentence dealers to death if they were convicted of selling heroin to juveniles. In 1961, California passed even harsher legislation that brought the state in line with the federal Narcotics Control Act of 1956. The severity of this legislation marked an extreme departure in California law. Before 1951, dating back to the 1920s, California judges had an enormous amount of discretion in sentencing. A first-time narcotics sale offense could receive a sentence of anywhere from six months to six years, while a second offense still ranged from six months to ten years maximum. See Phil Nicholas and Andrew Churchill, "The Federal Bureau of Narcotics, the states, and the origins of modern drug enforcement in the United States, 1950-1962," *Contemporary Drug Problems* 39 (Winter 2012), 620-622.

[40] From 1944 to 1954, narcotic violations climbed from 2.3 percent of Los Angeles County jail bookings to 7.5 percent, with every indication that the number would continue to rise. Many of these charges were vagrancy addiction charges, which I will discuss later in the article. Exhibit II, letter from Sheriff E.W. Biscailuz to Rep. H. Allen Smith, September 28, 1954, *Transcript of the Proceedings of the Subcommittee on Narcotics*, Assembly Interim Committee on Judiciary, October 14, 1954, 42.

reasonable expectancy of again becoming a lawfully productive, self-supporting individual."[41] Authorities supported hospitalization over incarceration because they believed that addicts would continue to pose a threat to public safety if left untreated.

California and federal officials alike agreed that the public health and criminal justice system should be combined to capture addicts and compel them into mandatory institutional treatment. Representatives from both fields had their role to play. Since physicians and psychiatrists were not going to be tracking addicts down in the streets, police officers would assume the responsibility of identifying and arresting suspected addicts. Arrests entered addicts into the criminal justice system, whose courts could then hand down legally binding sentences to treatment facilities. Medical and psychiatric staff in state-supervised facilities would work to cure addicts while also ensuring their isolation from the rest of society.

Support for the compulsory hospitalization of addicts aligned with the blossoming postwar "romance" with psychological knowledge and treatment, an era in which it seemed that psychological experts could treat any ailment, from racism to war trauma to drug addiction.[42] The decade after World War II saw the highest rates of mental hospital commitments in the nation's history; at the peak, in 1955, over half a million people were institutionalized.[43] Drug

---

[41] Exhibit II, *Transcript of proceedings of the Subcommittee on Narcotics*.

[42] Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008);
Rebecca Jo Plant, "Preventing the Inevitable: John Appel and the Problem of Psychiatric Casualties in the US Army During World War II, in *Science and Emotions after 1945,* ed. Frank Biess and Daniel M. Gross (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 209-38; Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust.* For an earlier look at the rise of psychiatric authority, see Elizabeth Lunbeck, *The Psychiatric Persuasion: Knowledge, Gender, and Power in Modern American* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[43] From the 1930s to the 1950s, over 600 adults per 100,000 were institutionalized, far more than any decade before or after. In 1955, the nation's mental hospitals had 560,000 patients in their custody—more than any year before or since. Interestingly, during this same time period, incarceration levels remained mostly flat, never rising above 175 adults per 100,000. It was not until the 1970s—the onset of mass incarceration—that the patterns switched. For the specific numbers, see Nicholas and Churchill, "The Federal Bureau of Narcotics," and Bernard E. Harcourt, "An Institutionalization Effect: The Impact of Mental Hospitalization and Imprisonment on Homicide in the United

addicts were one of many groups considered mentally ill and/or deviant that postwar officials thought were in need of mandatory psychiatric treatment.[44]

The prevailing understanding of addiction as a contagious disease also justified compulsory treatment in the name of quarantine. Government officials often compared their plans for mandatory hospitalization of addicts to past examples of quarantine for other, more clear-cut forms of infectious disease. Because the narcotics user was like "Typhoid Mary," a top federal narcotics agent argued in 1950, she "should be subjected to a compulsory quarantine until cured… by declaring her a menace to public health."[45] In 1951, a federal lawmaker described the drug addict as both "a 'disease' spreader" and a "victim of dope," who, "like victims of smallpox, must be quarantined for their own protection and for the protection of the rest of society." "Until they are cured, rather than limiting their cure to voluntary steps," he argued, it was necessary to "[make] their hospitalization compulsory."[46] California officials agreed with that assessment and called for expanding access to mandatory treatment so that "every known addict may be eventually removed from the community… [and sent] to a state hospital for quarantine."[47] Compulsory institutional treatment was necessary, first and foremost, to protect

States, 1934-2001," *The Journal of Legal Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (January 2011). For more on the era of large-scale institutionalization in mid-twentieth century America, see: Gerald Grob, *From Asylum to Community: Mental Health Policy in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Joel Braslow, *Mental Ills and Bodily Cures: Psychiatric Treatment in the First Half of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[44] See Ronald Bayer, *Homosexuality and American Psychiatry: The Politics of Diagnosis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987) for an illustrative example.

[45] "Investigation of Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce. Part 7: New York, New Jersey," 81st Congress, 1950 (Testimony of Samuel Levine), 1078.

[46] *Hearings on Control of Narcotics, Marijuana, and Barbiturates,* 82nd Congress, 1951 (statement of Rep. Sidney Yates," 41.

[47] Judge Louis H. Burke, Los Angeles Superior Court, "The Narcotics Problem – In Proper Perspective," a pamphlet in support of Senate Bill 81 which sought to enact civil commitment procedures for narcotic addicts, April 24, 1961, Folder "LP 318:001-AB1810-AB2824," Box 1, Series 1: Bill Files, 1956-1996, Nicholas C. Petris Papers, California State Archives, Sacramento (Petris Papers).

"the rest of society," the "public," and the "community" *from* the addict, who could not be allowed to move about in free society as long as they carried their disease.

Mid-twentieth century authorities assumed that voluntary treatment was destined to fail, given the dominant disease concept of addiction. Addicts in withdrawal supposedly lost all control of their decision-making powers and would likely abandon treatment if they got the chance. "Most drug addicts are emotionally unstable and weak-willed individuals," a top USPHS official stated in 1947. "[Their] weaknesses are amplified once withdrawal procedures are initiated, and many of the patients are unable to exercise the will power needed to carry them through this difficult period." California authorities also concluded that addicts would not willingly undergo treatment based on an exhaustive review of contemporary medical literature on the subject. One 1957 study conducted by two Detroit psychiatrists made a particular impression on CA DOC officials. The pair had opened an experimental clinic for the city's addict population hoping for a large number of voluntary admissions, but found that less than three percent of their 510 patients had come to them voluntarily. In the CA DOC's internal report, officials emphasized the psychiatrists' conclusion that the "addicted person must be under legal jurisdiction" for treatment to occur at all.[48]

Moreover, addicts were not supposed to have sufficient internal "motivation" to quit using drugs, which meant that such motivation would have to be compelled by outside parties. It did not seem to be a task that physicians and psychiatrists could do alone. According to one Los Angeles judge, "medical science has discovered no way of artificially instilling this motivation"

[48] *The Narcotic Offender,* 58.

in addicts. [49] Therefore, if clinicians were going to succeed in curing addicts, they needed state force to support their efforts. Los Angeles officials argued that addicts did not possess an "intrinsic willingness to relinquish the habit," but participated in treatment only when their drug supply was cut off or they faced "impending arrest."[50] In the postwar paradigm, the peripheral threat of incarceration was a key part of addiction treatment because it acted as a substitute for the internal drive to get sober that addicts allegedly did not possess.

In postwar popular culture, mandatory institutional treatment was portrayed as an effective solution that required collaboration between medical professionals and law enforcement officials**.** In 1946, the famous boxer Barney Ross, who had become addicted to morphine during his service in World War II, publicly turned himself into the Federal Bureau of Narcotics in order to receive a sentence to the federal facility in Lexington, Kentucky. That was "the only way I could get adequate treatment," Ross told members of the press.[51] A columnist from the *Los Angeles Times* cheered Ross's decision, predicting that "doctors will raise his hand before the 15 rounds are up… He'll lick it. He's a cinch."[52] A 1952 comic book recounted a similar tale. In "Teen-Age Dope Slaves," an edition of the *Rex Morgan, M.D.* comic book series, the titular doctor Rex Morgan partnered with an agent from the Federal Bureau of Narcotics to save Bruce, "the desperate boy who thought he could 'quit any time,'" from heroin addiction.[53] Morgan

[49] Burke, "*The Narcotics Problem – In Proper Perspective."* Burke was quoting Dr. James Lowry, Chief Medical Officer of the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital in Lexington, Kentucky, in "Hospital Treatment of the Narcotic Addict," *Federal Probation*, December 1956, 42-51.
[50] "The Case Against Amending Section 11391 of the Health and Safety Code," written in opposition to Synanon's voluntary treatment program. Folder "LP318: 10," Box 1, Series 1, Nicholas C. Petris Papers, CSA. The opposition case cited the work of Dr. David Ausubel, an influential clinical psychiatrist who wrote a series of articles in the late 1940s and 1950s about the addict's pathological inability to inhibit his craving.
[51] "Barney Ross Fights New Foe—Morphine Habit," Los Angeles *Times*, Sep 12, 1946, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
[52] *The Lighter Side*, the Los Angeles *Times*, Sept 16, 1946, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
[53] "Teen-Age Dope Slaves, as exposed by Rex Morgan, M.D.," Harvey Comics No. 1, April 1952, 2, https://comicbookplus.com/?dlid=71378.

checked Bruce into a city hospital for treatment after finding him unconscious from an overdose. When Bruce fled his hospital room, Morgan and the FBN agent tracked him down and returned him to his bed. After two weeks of compulsory treatment, Bruce was deemed cured. His nurse and loved ones visited him at the hospital on his release day, cheering him on: "You've won your fight!"[54] According to these publications, if law and medicine worked together to compel the addict into treatment, the outcome would be a speedy, guaranteed cure.

Another postwar comic book emphasized the folly of allowing addicts to get sober without state force backing up their treatment. A 1951 comic book called "Trapped!" followed Bill, another white, middle-class high schooler who traveled the same path to addiction as did Eddie and Bruce. After Bill started stealing and getting violent, his parents called a physician to the house to examine their son. "The health authorities have warned us about drug addiction," the doctor said, "and it sounds as if Bill is one of the victims… If so, he should go to the hospital right away!" Upon arrival, the doctor grabbed Bill's arm and searched it for concrete evidence of intravenous heroin use: "Just as I thought! Marks of many injections!" Bill's father immediately brought his son to a nearby hospital for treatment, but after two nights, Bill snuck out to buy heroin. In the middle of the meeting with his dealer, police officers rushed into the scene to arrest Bill. As Bill sat in his cell, a social services official visited him, with Bill's mother in tow. "The judge has already promised to parole you in our custody, son," the official told him, "if you'll promise to go to a federal hospital. They'll help you lick this thing!" The comic's final squares show Bill surrounded by his family at a train station, on his way to the federal facility. His girlfriend promised to wait for him until he "came back cured," and his mother asked Bill to

[54] "Teen-Age Dope Slaves," 34.

accept the authority of the physicians and psychiatrists awaiting him: "Do everything they tell you!" Before boarding his train, Bill assured everyone that he would "stick it out."[55]

"Trapped!" and "Teen-Age Dope Slaves" distilled the underlying premises of compulsory treatment into a popular narrative. Medical attention was essential, but not enough on its own; Bill and Bruce exposed the vulnerability of voluntary care by fleeing the hospitals to which they were first brought. Instead, the medical effort to cure addiction would be successfully only if it was backed by state force. In each comic book, the police had to arrive in order to convert a voluntary hospital stay into a mandatory one. Furthermore, both stories focused on the path to treatment rather than what addiction treatment itself actually constituted. In "Teen-Age Dope Slaves," Bruce's story jumped from the pain of withdrawal to his two weeks coming to an end and Bruce having been cured. "Trapped!" ended without Bill having even entered the federal hospital that was supposed to cure him. Instead, the final square in which Bill waited for his train was akin to a fairytale's happily-ever-after. Bill's happy ending—his "cure"—was not shown, but assumed.

The popular narrative around mandatory treatment was clearly racialized, as it was held up as the savior of white, middle-class teenagers who had been seduced into addiction. All three protagonists of the comic books fit that category, while Black and Latinx youths were completely absent, not appearing as addict or dealer. The comics emphasized the threat of addiction—the malice of the street "pusher," the compulsion to commit crime in order to avoid withdrawal pains—while conjuring sympathy for only a very specific type of addict: the young, white teen with a bright future that was being smashed to bits.[56] The reality of addiction was much more

[55] "Trapped!", 1951, Harvey Comics and the Committee on Narcotics of the Welfare Council of New York City, http://www.ep.tc/trapped/

[56] See Schneider, *Smack,* ch. 4: "The Panic over Adolescent Heroin Use."

complicated, of course: Where were the adult addicts? Or the teens who experimented with drugs by stealing prescription barbiturates from their parents' medicine cabinet? Moreover, though there is no reason to believe that white youths used drugs any less than Black and Latinx youths, the actual targets of law enforcement were disproportionately likely to be the latter.[57] The popular portrayal of addiction treatment identified compulsory hospitalization as the only path back to the social mainstream for an imagined young white victim while simultaneously reinforcing the tropes that cast drug addicts as dangerous "dope slaves" from whom society needed protection. Consequently, it helped justify the unequal deployment of state force against illicit drug users and addicts.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, medical and criminal frameworks regarding drug addiction were so intertwined as to be tangled together. The addict's sickness made him a criminal threat, and the addict's criminal activity was evidence of his sickness. Underlying both paradigms was a set of more fundamental assumptions at play in government policy and public discourse: that drug addicts needed to be controlled and contained. Authorities supported compulsory hospitalization because it seemed to provide the medical treatment necessary to cure the disease of addiction while also promising the addict's isolation from the rest of society. In the postwar years, institutional confinement and addiction treatment were one and the same.

Postwar California's System of Confinement in the Name of Addiction Treatment

Though there was steadfast consensus behind mandatory institutional treatment in the 1940s and 1950s, the task of creating a more robust legal and structural apparatus for the model fell to the states. California officials were the first to create a state-wide system of compulsory

[57] Bennett, "The Discovery and Treatment of Juvenile Drug Use;" Yang, "The Thin Blue Line Down Central Avenue."

treatment—also called civil commitment of addicts—that would become the model for federal policy by the mid-1960s. The need for states to take the lead was threefold. First, space was a big issue. The only two government facilities for drug addicts were still the federal facilities in Lexington, Kentucky, and Fort Worth, Texas. The two hospitals' combined capacity would have held less than one-tenth of California's estimated addict population—and that was assuming that there were no admits from any other states.[58] Second, there were deeper problems of constitutionality at play. Federal policy under the Porter Act of 1929 did not apply to California's court system. California's municipal and state courts could not sentence individuals to federal institutions. As a workaround, California judges sometimes suspended defendants' sentences on the condition that they travel to Kentucky or Texas to admit themselves into one of the federal facilities. However, as voluntary admits, California offenders could leave the institutions whenever they wanted, which defeated the purpose of the compulsory model. Third, the federal government was not keen to assume responsibility for treating the nation's addicts. A bill granting state courts authorization to sentence offenders to federal facilities languished in Congress throughout the 1940s and 1950s; neither the Truman and Eisenhower administrations pursued its passage out of fear that it "would transfer to the Federal Government a responsibility which now rests with the states," though they were both "entirely in sympathy" with its goal.[59]

As a result, postwar California officials decided to create their own program of mandatory treatment. Their approach bound the public health and penal systems together out of practical necessity, enlisting police officers, physicians, psychiatrists, and other mental health

[58] Lexington was built for a capacity of 1,100 inmate-patients, while California's estimated addict population in 1954 was around 20,000, at least according to authorities. See *Transcript of proceedings of the Subcommittee on Narcotics*, 3.
[59] *Public Health Service Act (Narcotic Addicts),* 83rd Congress, 1953 (letter from H. Chapman Rose, Assistant Treasury Secretary, to Hon. Chales A. Wolverton), 21.

workers in the endeavor. First, officials turned to the misdemeanor offense of vagrancy addiction as the best mechanism by which suspected addicts could be introduced into the state's criminal justice system. On California's books since 1939, Section 11721 of the Health and Safety Code criminalized addiction itself, mandating that "No person shall unlawfully use or be addicted to the unlawful use of narcotics."[60] In practice, police officers typically arrested people for violating Section 11721 upon observing the presence of hypodermic needle marks on their arms, where, presumably, they had injected themselves with heroin. (Heroin users often referred to the charge as a "marks" arrest for this reason.) The marks might have been new or they might have been scars from weeks, months, even years prior, but they could still constitute sufficient proof of addiction for police officers and, usually, judges and juries. California prosecutors liked pursuing Section 11721 charges because they had "no trouble at all in getting convictions on addiction cases" during jury trials.[61] Jail staffers were less enthusiastic, as were state officials. The sentence for a vagrancy addiction conviction was ninety days in jail and, after 1953, five years of probation. As it stood, state officials lamented that convicted addicts were arrested by police and sent to jail only to be "in and out just the same as they are in and out of a mill."[62] They did not have a problem with addicts being arrested for their condition; they wanted to change the location of their institutional confinement. Instead of convicted addicts cycling futilely in and out of jail, they should be committed to mandatory treatment on the basis of a vagrancy addiction charge.

Initially, California authorities turned to the state's mental hospitals to house convicted addicts. Section 11721 played a key role in their effort to convert addict cases into hospital

[60] Los Angeles Police Department, *Annual Report,* 1952, cited in Mina Yang, "A Thin Blue Line down Central Avenue," 230.
[61] *Transcript of the Proceedings of the Subcommittee on Narcotics*, 42.
[62] *Transcript of Proceedings,* 73.

commitments, as officials used it to create a patchwork proto-drug court. By the mid-1950s, television news programs in the Los Angeles region were airing segments advertising that heroin addicts could "take the cure" at Camarillo Mental Hospital, located about fifty miles north of the city.[63] The segments told viewers that interested parties should check into the downtown Los Angeles General Hospital, where they would sign up for the new program and be transferred to Camarillo. To many heroin users who wanted to try the program, it seemed like they were voluntarily admitting themselves, as they might have done before in Lexington or Fort Worth. However, the paperwork that people signed in order to receive treatment included a guilty plea for misdemeanor vagrancy addiction.[64] According to a 1951 state law, that plea initiated court proceedings wherein a judge could commit the defendant to three to eight months in a state mental hospital, depending on the hospital superintendent's recommendation.[65] Once an individual signed the forms required to receive treatment at Camarillo, they could not change their minds and leave after the fact.

Yet mental hospital solution could only be a stopgap measure. There was limited space and California Department of Mental Hygiene (CA DMH) officials, who oversaw the facilities, did not particularly want to take responsibility for the state's addict population anyway. Given the postwar era's high rates of institutionalization, California's mental hospitals were already bursting at the seams. Camarillo's population alone had risen from 4,123 patients in 1945 to over 7,000 in 1960.[66] Addict patients had always constituted a tiny percentage of the state's hospital

[63] Lena Lindsay. Interview by author, Los Angeles, August 27, 2019; "Interview #3 with Betty D, Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon.
[64] "Interview #3 with Betty D, Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon.
[65] Section 5350, California Welfare and Institutions Code, present in code as of March 1952. *Preliminary report of the Subcommittee on Narcotics of the Assembly Interim Committee on Judiciary and Assembly Interim Committee on Public Health,* 18.
[66] *Transcript of proceedings of the Subcommittee on Narcotics,* Appendix.

population; in 1954, the sum total in all of California's mental hospitals was just 400.[67] Now state officials were proposing to add an estimated 20,000 cases to the mix. The idea "staggered" the head of the CA DMH, who considered it not only impractical but unwise. On top of the pressures of overcrowding, public health officials were concerned about addicts' supposed lack of motivation to complete treatment. Hospital staff complained that addict patients smuggled narcotics into the facilities, and behaved like they "want to get out as soon as they can." If addicts were going to evade treatment, the CA DMH chief concluded, "there's no point in using hospital space that's direly needed for other, perhaps more worthy, people than addicts." [68] Throughout the 1950s, California public health officials argued that they needed to prioritize patients who would surrender to treatment instead of struggle against it. Even if addicts needed treatment, that did not mean that state medical authorities believed they necessarily deserved it, especially in comparison with other individuals seeking psychiatric care.

By the late 1950s, the CA DOC took the initiative to create and oversee a state-wide program of mandatory treatment, which was also the first comprehensive system of civil commitment of addicts in the nation. Medical and penal approaches to addiction had been entangled for decades, so it did not seem contradictory to have a corrections agency take the lead on a putatively therapeutic endeavor. Moreover, since its creation in 1944, when Governor Earl Warren dissolved the corrupt alliance of wardens that ran the state's prisons like mini-fiefdoms, the CA DOC prided itself on being a modern, scientific department that tried to rehabilitate inmates with the latest psychological and sociological techniques.[69] Mental health experts ran

[67] *Transcript of proceedings of the Subcommittee on Narcotics,* Appendix.
[68] *Transcript of proceedings of the Subcommittee on Narcotics*, 79-80.
[69] For more on the postwar CDC's robust project of rehabilitative corrections, see Volker Janssen, "From the Inside Out: Therapeutic Penology and Political Liberalism in Postwar California," *Osiris*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2007), 116-134.

group counseling sessions and conducted surveys to understand the roots of criminal behavior, while statisticians measured outcomes and analyzed psychological data to ascertain how the agency could better prevent recidivism. Consequently, California lawmakers thought the CA DOC was the ideal agency to run "a solid and comprehensive treatment program… in conjunction with the control [aspect]."[70]

Control in the name of treatment was the core principle of the CA DOC's program. In 1959, the department rolled out a trial run of "Narcotic Treatment-Control Units" (NTCUs) in Los Angeles, where addict cases on parole would submit to rapid drug testing, a cutting-edge procedure at the time; participate in group therapy sessions; and meet with parole officers.[71] In 1961, the California legislature approved the CA DOC's Civil Addict program, which included the construction of a new state hospital-prison for addict offenders. The California Rehabilitation Center (CRC), built out of a 1920s hotel that had been converted into a Naval hospital during World War II, accepted its first batch of patient-inmates in January 1963.[72] Under the Civil Addict program, convicted addicts would be sentenced to CRC for mandatory treatment under the supervision of physicians, psychiatrists, and other mental health workers. Upon their release, they would report to their region's NTCU. If a parolee failed a drug test, they would be sent back to CRC.

At the dawn of the sixties, compulsory treatment was more entrenched in California than ever before. Yet, at the same time, it was also beset by the same internal contradictions that had

[70] *Adult Authority—Executive Meeting Minutes*, May 15, 1959, Folder F3717:1, Adult Authority Records, CDC-CSA.
[71] *Report of the Director of Corrections to the Board of Corrections*, September 18, 1959, Folder F3717:19, Adult Authority Records, CDC-CSA.
[72] "California Rehabilitation Center," California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/facility-locator/crc/.

plagued the model for decades. Contemporaries heralded the shift to civil commitment, which occurred in New York the following year in 1962 and federally in 1966, as a more enlightened approach to addiction; officials finally recognized that addiction was a disease, not a crime, and should be treated as a matter of public health.[73] Many modern scholars have adopted this contemporary analysis, referring to the late 1950s and early 1960s as the "medical turn" in twentieth-century addiction history. Absent from the contemporary framework, however, was an acknowledgement of the profound continuity between the Porter Narcotic Farm Act of 1929, which initiated the mandatory treatment model, and the civil commitment programs of the 1960s. Both were marked by the intermingling of medical and criminal paradigms, not a choice of one over the other. Both endorsed treatment as a goal—as long as it was undergirded by state force—but did not put a huge priority on whether institutional treatment actually worked, let alone whether drug addicts themselves were being well-served by the policy.

Some Unintended Consequences of Medicalization and Treatment Policy

In the postwar context, support for addiction treatment often reinforced negative stereotypes about drug addicts and justified their confinement regardless of whether it would lead to cure. First, the celebratory discourse around addiction treatment could obscure the fact that the initial push to create separate facilities was mostly motivated by government officials trying to *get out* of dealing with addicts. In many cases, addiction treatment was a counterpoint to incarceration simply by default. 1920s federal prison wardens were the most politically powerful source of support for the Porter Act, for which they campaigned because they wanted addicts out of their facilities. In the 1950s, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, which

[73] A notable example is "Drug Addiction – Crime or Disease?," a joint report of the American Medical Association and American Bar Association, published in 1961.

oversaw the county jails, lobbied for mandatory treatment on the same grounds. Different branches and agencies of government also passed the buck to others when they could. The CA DOC created the Civil Addict program after the state's public mental health department refused to take responsibility for treatment. As mentioned in the previous section, one of the main reasons that California had to spearhead its own program was the reluctance on the part of the federal government to foot more of the bill for addiction treatment. This is not to say that any of these parties did not think that treatment was a better approach than incarceration, but it is a reminder that support for addiction treatment came from a variety of motivations.

Second, the consensus around mandatory treatment did not depend on addicts actually being "cured" by it, to use the language of the era. To begin with, comparing addiction treatment to quarantine framed treatment as a measure meant to protect the public from drug addicts rather than a purely rehabilitative effort with the welfare of the addict at its heart. The purpose of quarantining sick people is to isolate them from others, not necessarily to cure them. In fact, Mary Mallon or "Typhoid Mary," whom a federal official likened to a drug addict, died in compulsory quarantine after twenty-three years of isolation, never having been declared cured.[74] Furthermore, clinicians tasked with treated drug addicts since the 1930s could not claim that they were curing their patients.[75] In 1954, the CA DMH chief admitted to California lawmakers that, when it came to "the type of addict that is sentenced" to their facilities, "we don't know how to treat him and we don't know when he is cured." He estimated that only one to three percent of

[74] Filio Marineli, Gregory Tsoucalas, Marianna Karamanou, and George Androutsos, "Mary Mallon (1869-1938) and the history of typhoid fever," *Annals of Gastroenterology* 26(2), 2013, 132-134.
[75] In the mid-twentieth-century paradigm of addiction treatment, "cure" meant never using drugs again; any relapse after being released from institutional confinement was "failure." In the 1950s, the dominant disease concept of addiction had not yet undergone its transformation into a chronic, or lifelong, model, which occurred in the late 1960s and 1970s. Instead, it was still framed in terms of other infectious diseases like tuberculosis or syphilis, which had a measurable, black-and-white moment of cure at which point the person was no longer contagious.

addicts who came through California's mental hospital system were cured "permanently."[76] The state mental hospitals' record was similar to the data coming from federal institutions in Lexington and Fort Worth, which consistently put their cure rate around five percent.[77] As early as 1948, one federal lawmaker lamented that the government was "pouring money down a rat hole" by funding facilities for "the riffraff of the country" when there was "uniformity of opinion that…we have not made any particular progress" in curing them.[78] Still, ten years, later, California based its Civil Addict program on the same model of compulsory institutional treatment that had been met with failure by its own metrics.

Third, the compulsory treatment model was predicated on the belief that drug addicts did not possess the internal motivation to stop using drugs, which seemed to explain why institutions had such low rates of cure. Rather than reconsider the model itself, government officials shifted blame onto the people who had not been cured, concluding that they must be incurable, while still supporting their confinement. According to California officials, addict cases who did not respond to hospital treatment were the "dead ender type of incurable person."[79] So were so-called "criminal" addicts, or individuals who had a criminal record—even though that could very well mean that they had been arrested for having needle marks on their arms.[80] The term "dead ender" indicated that the individual in question had no real future, no way of getting sober, no chance at a different life. Given that only one to three percent of addicts came out of California's institutions cured, the "dead ender" category appeared to constitute the vast majority of the

---

[76] *Transcript of proceedings of the Subcommittee on Narcotics*, 80.
[77] *Transcript of proceedings of the Subcommittee on Narcotics*, 109. Even these numbers are fuzzy, though, because Lexington did not keep track of its former patients after they were released.
[78] *Hearings before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations on the Department of Labor-Federal Security Agency Appropriation Bill for 1949: Part 2,* 80th Congress, 1948 (statement of Rep. Frank D. Keefe), 343-344.
[79] *Transcript of Proceedings of the Subcommittee on Narcotics*, 35.
[80] *Transcript of proceedings of the Subcommittee on Narcotics*, 35-36.

addict population. When it came to these individuals, officials made explicit that the priority was not the welfare of the addict, but that of the general public, who had to be protected from contagion. Incurable addicts needed to "be placed somewhere," a California lawmaker argued in 1954, "where [they] will be taken off the street and will no longer be a contaminating influence in society."[81] Support for the institutional model did not depend on the presence of effective treatment and cure within the hospitals to which addicts were sent.

In fact, postwar California and federal officials seriously considered creating facilities for lifelong confinement of addicts. The decades-long campaign for institutional treatment greased the wheels for more drastic solutions to gain support. It helped to create the perception that incurable addicts were responsible for not being cured, since treatment was available. It also classified addicts as vectors of infection who needed to be quarantined. The contagious addict still had to be confined even if they would never be cured. The chief of California's Mental Hygiene department argued that as long as addicts had the "chance at some treatment," it was valid to "put those away on a permanent basis who fail." [82] Similarly, a Los Angeles judge maintained that the addict who "has been given an opportunity to be cured and goes back to [drug use] should be isolated and quarantined and kept away if we have to for the rest of his natural life because of the damage he can do if left at large." In 1954, California lawmakers contemplated the possibility of creating a "colony" for incurable addicts on Catalina Island, located about forty miles off the coast of Southern California. Given its literal separation from the rest of the state, a California justice department official thought it was the "ideal spot."[83] The idea was not implemented, but it was not forgotten, either. Six years later, a prominent Los

[81] *Transcript of Proceedings of the Subcommittee on Narcotics*, 7.
[82] *Transcript of Proceedings of the Subcommittee on Narcotics*, 35.
[83] *Transcript of Proceedings of the Subcommittee on Narcotics*, 74-75.

Angeles official revived the proposal to "isolate and quarantine narcotics offenders" on another Southern California island, a model he equated to the "leper colonies" that existed on islands off Hawai'i and the Philippines.[84] Federal officials also considered permanent confinement. In 1956, Senator Price Daniel lobbied for the construction of "a farm some place, or colony," where "chronic addicts" could spend the rest of their lives. "You can put them [there] and let them try to grow their own vegetables and do something around the place," he explained, "but keep them out of society."[85] Ideas like Daniel's did not come to fruition, but they revealed the fundamental tenet of the institutional model: confinement, regardless of cure.

Such proposals also revealed the pessimism about a cure for addiction that ran deep during the postwar years, even as the institutional model became more entrenched. A psychiatrist in California's Mental Hygiene department noted that, among her colleagues, there was a "hopeless, sort of give up vein that permeate[d] the discussions… about prevention and treatment."[86] Heroin users and university professors alike recalled that the reigning mantra of the era was, "Once an addict, always an addict."[87] In the midst of the pessimism, some alternatives to institutional treatment emerged. Over the 1950s, a small yet growing number of public intellectuals, medical professionals, and lawyers started to advocate for state-funded clinics that provided low-cost, legal doses of opiates to addicts, or maintenance.[88] While the maintenance movement was motivated by humanitarian and anti-carceral concerns, it was also driven by the prevailing assumption that most addicts would never stop using drugs. In 1952, a *Harper's*

---

[84] "News from Kenneth Hahn – 3/23/60," p. 2, Folder 12, Box 1033, mssHahn collection, Huntington Library.
[85] *Control of Narcotics in D.C.: Unpublished Hearings before the Subcommittee on Improvements in the Federal Criminal Code, Committee on the Judiciary,* 84th Congress, 1956, 86.
[86] *Transcript of proceedings of the Subcommittee on Narcotics*, 109.
[87] "Copout Pamphlets," Synanon Communications Department, July 1967, Box 122; Dr. Lewis Yablonsky comments in "Transcript: 621217 – Passalaqua-Grey," Box 225, UCLA Synanon.
[88] See: "Drug Addiction: Crime or Disease?". See also Roberts, "'Rehabilitation as Boundary Object,'" Musto, *The American Disease.*

article advocated for maintenance on the grounds that "there is no doubt that many people must live as addicts until they die." Given that fact, until their death—which was "for them," the author added, "[a] happy time"—the government could at least try to make "useful citizens" out of them and give them the drugs they needed to get through the day.[89] One psychiatrist who saw addict patients had grown so "deeply pessimistic about the rehabilitation and control, much less the *cure* of the addict" by the end of the 1950s that he saw lifelong confinement and maintenance as two sides of the same coin—both of them last resorts. "Put [the] addict away either in hospitals or jails for the rest of his life," he argued, "or give him all the heroin he wants."[90] Though support for maintenance grew in elite circles in the East Coast over the 1950s and 1960s, it played no role in California's addiction policy, which focused on strengthening the institutional model in the name of "treatment and control."[91] The pessimism that many felt about the efficacy of addiction treatment did not stop the further entrenchment of the institutional model.

Why perpetuate a system of institutional cure when cure did not occur for almost the entirety of the addict patient population? Kathleen Frydl posits in her analysis of twentieth-century drug wars in the United States that a system which fails at its stated goals continues when it is successful in achieving other things. For example, though militant policy has not decreased the overall supply of illicit drugs or quashed trafficking rings for good, it "has churned away nonetheless," having become "a valued tool of statecraft, especially in regard to the developing world," as well as an overall "way to police, especially in urban minority

[89] Alden Stevens, "Make Dope Legal," November 1, 1952, *Harper's Magazine*, p. 46.
[90] Casriel, *So Fair a House:* 3.
[91] It is possible that this was due to state officials' more recent memory of maintenance clinics, as Los Angeles was the site of the last major one in operation after Progressive-era narcotics prohibitions, closing in 1934. State lawmakers believed that maintenance clinics perpetuated and encouraged addiction, while also aiding the black-market traffic by providing dealers with a low-cost source for their supply. See: Jim Baumohl, ""Maintaining Orthodoxy: The Depression-Era Struggle over Morphine Maintenance in California," Contemporary Drug Problems 27, no. 1 (2000), 17-75.

neighborhoods."[92] Scholars must consider the system's actual successes more fundamental to its existence, even if they are not proffered as its explicit aims. "Rather than simply observe that the drug war is a hopeless failure," she argues, "it is time to take seriously its everyday objectives," which "deserve to be considered as causal factors in their own right."[93] So, what was compulsory hospitalization accomplishing if not cure? The obvious answer is that it created a legal and structural apparatus meant to guarantee the social isolation of an allegedly dangerous population. This is not to argue that government officials did not genuinely believe that addicts needed medical treatment instead of incarceration, or even that they did not hold out hope for a cure. Yet even when the system repeatedly failed to provide effective treatment or achieve cures, it "churned away nonetheless"—and even gained momentum.

Parsing whether the mid-twentieth-century model of mandatory treatment was more medical or criminal does little to illuminate the practical reality of the situation, for not only were the two approaches completely interwoven and dependent on one another, but they also shared the same logic of social exclusion. At its core, the main priority of the institutional model was to remove drug addicts from free society. In that respect, the system was only becoming more streamlined and comprehensive by the dawn of the 1960s.

Addict Experiences of the Institutional Consensus and the Appeal of Synanon

Where did the mandatory treatment model leave addicts? This section focuses on the experiences of self-identified drug addicts in postwar Los Angeles who were caught in the midst of efforts to compel their treatment. They were familiar with the concept that addiction was a disease and that they, as sick people, needed professional medical attention. Contrary to the official consensus

[92] Frydl, *The Drug Wars in America,* 10.
[93] Frydl, *The Drug Wars in America,* 11.

that addicts were unmotivated to end their addiction, every individual whose story is discussed in this chapter battled against their addiction and tried a multitude of ways to regulate their drug habit or stop using altogether. Many even pursued hospital commitments in the hope that physicians and psychiatrists had a cure to offer them. However, they learned firsthand that mandatory addiction treatment seemed to be driven more by the desire to isolate them from the public than any conviction that they would be cured in confinement. The form that medicalization of addiction took in the postwar years fostered a sense of hopelessness in many addicts. The individuals whose stories are recounted in this chapter wanted to be free from addiction, as well as the stigma, loneliness, and marginality that came with it. They yearned for a cure and were disappointed when medical professionals could not offer them one. In the words of one woman who was addicted to heroin throughout the 1950s, it felt like there was simply "no place" for addicts to go.[94]

By the end of the 1950s, Synanon started to coalesce around a couple blocks of rundown apartments, hostel rooms, and an abandoned grocery storefront in the beachfront neighborhood of Ocean Park, Los Angeles. It appealed to Angeleno addicts for how it challenged the institutional treatment model. There were no psychiatrists or doctors, no court order forcing them to be there, and no security guards or bars on the doors. It was a place where addicts gathered freely and started to experiment with getting sober on the basis of their own decisions. These were controversial ideas—and ones that fascinated the addicts in this chapter.

---

[94] Lena Lindsay. Interview by author, Los Angeles, August 27, 2019.

By approximately 1951, Betty Beckham had been using heroin regularly for about a year, though she did not consider herself an addict. She was twenty-eight years old, a Black woman, and an Angeleno since the age of twelve, when she moved to Los Angeles from Omaha, Nebraska with her mother and brother during the Great Depression. Her life had been hard. In junior high, she was already the caretaker of her mother, who had been blinded by a botched brain surgery at the Los Angeles General Hospital, where the city's uninsured poor went for medical care. Her first husband, actor Ben Carter, pushed her into sex work to advance his career, offering her to producers and studio heads at parties in the Hollywood Hills. In 1949, Beckham's second husband died in a car accident on the Hollywood Freeway. She moved back in with her mother and brother, and enrolled in cosmetology school while continuing to work as a prostitute. Beckham first heard about heroin from her fellow sex workers; it was "a new kick on the scene" from the regular "pills and pot" that they used. "The girls [would] talk about kicks they would have," Beckham recalled, "and I was still looking for something, a kind of escape… I found myself going through a ritual of getting up and fixing every morning before I went into work." Over that first year, Beckham cherished the "fantasy trip world" to which heroin gave her access. She would get "real dressed up" and go downtown to see a concert or look window-shop along the streets. When she was high, she also felt "more creative" at her craft as a beautician.[95]

Beckham was afraid of getting addicted, which, by all accounts, was an irreversible condition. Her friend Manuel, who also used heroin, had warned her that "once you get hooked—really hooked—you'll never be able to kick it. Once a dope fiend, always a dope fiend." To Beckham, becoming a "dope fiend" meant that she would be the same as the "junkies" who "live in slum rooms and don't eat and don't really bathe properly." It was important to

[95] "Interview #2 with Betty D, Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon.

Beckham and Manuel that they not join the ranks of the "dope fiends" and "junkies," and they took deliberate steps to avoid such a fate. Manuel had told her that whenever she started to feel "too hooked," she should quit for a while in order to reduce her tolerance, and therefore the amount of heroin she needed to get high.[96] Some mornings, when Beckham felt sicker than usual and had to miss shifts at the beauty shop to buy more heroin, she knew it was time to implement Manuel's advice. Both Manuel and Beckham understood that becoming a "dope fiend" meant that a wall went up between them and the rest of society, marking them as degraded and doomed.

What Beckham did not fully understand was the extent to which she had already been marked as a "dope fiend" simply because she used heroin. The lines that heroin users drew between different types of drug use were not ones that law enforcement, medical professionals, or the general public recognized. One day circa 1951, Beckham was sitting in a parked car on a street in downtown Los Angeles with Manuel; they were out of heroin and were hoping to find a dealer. Suddenly, a police officer appeared next to Beckham's open window, barking, "What are you doing here?" Beckham tried to think of an excuse, but the officer had already grabbed her arm and pushed up her sleeve. On her forearm were "fresh puncture marks" from her fix earlier that day. The officer ordered them out of the car. Manuel took off running and escaped, but Beckham was arrested for vagrancy addiction. It was the first time she had ever been arrested. Instead of booking her, the officers interrogated her in the downtown station, hoping to get proof that Manuel was part of a larger trafficking operation.[97] She had no clue what they were talking about, but they did not believe her. When they found no criminal record to leverage against her, the officers grew even more frustrated. "You goddamned junkies," one exclaimed, as if she had

[96] "Interview #3 with Betty D, Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon.
[97] Frydl, *The Drug Wars in America,* 239-240.

pulled some trick on them.[98] They released her on the condition that she leave the neighborhood immediately, threatening her with jail if they saw her again. Terrified, she moved west, though she did not quit using heroin.

About four years later, Beckham was arrested on another set of vagrancy addiction charges. This time, she was sent directly to jail to await trial. Over the first couple days, Beckham went through withdrawal in a segregated cell for addict cases. The women with whom she shared the cell were sweating, vomiting, "moaning and yelling, [and] calling for the nurse" to give them pain medication. The nurse did not show up until later in the night, only to refuse every request, saying, "You don't get any kind of medication in here, hype!"[99] ("Hype," another slang term for heroin addict, referred to the hypodermic needle used to inject heroin intravenously.) Beckham spent the rest of her ninety-day sentence in a segregated addicts' wing, where women traded drug stories and made plans to use together after they got out. One of Beckham's cellmates said she could connect her with a major narcotics distributor after she was released, so she could work for him and have easy access to heroin. Beckham wondered whether "this was the end point" for her: "Just stay loaded." [100] It seemed that she could not avoid becoming a "dope fiend" after all.[101]

Beckham came to find that being addicted to heroin in 1950s Los Angeles was to receive the message that she was subject to contempt, neglect, and the imposition of state force. The complexity of her life story, the reasons she started using and enjoying heroin, the efforts she

---

[98] "Interview #3 with Betty D, Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon.
[99] "Hype" was a derogatory slang term for heroin addict that referred to the hypodermic needles they used. Users often used it to describe themselves, just like they did with "dope fiend." "Interview #2 with Bettye Coleman, Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon.
[100] "Bettye Coleman," *Seven Voices of Synanon*, 34.
[101] For an excellent discussion of how institutions helped create the "junkie" identity and subculture, see: Joseph Spillane, "Inside the Fantastic Lodge: Relational ties, gender, and addict identity," *Social History of Drugs and Alcohol*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2017), 65-84.

made to avoid becoming addicted, the dreams she still tried to hold onto for her future—all of that would be flattened into the official category of "addict." The label came with consequences. Because her arms had needle marks on them, she was a "goddamned junkie" who could be arrested at any time. Because she was placed in an addict's cell, she was a "hype" who did not deserve relief from the pain of withdrawal. Beckham noticed how her heroin use seemed to lessen the value of her life and freedom in other people's eyes. In turn, she started to feel the same about herself. Maybe once a person was addicted to heroin, it really did mark the "end point" of one's life, and there was no better future to look forward to. When she thought she that might "just stay loaded" forever, it felt like defeat.

So, when Beckham heard about a hospital cure for addiction, she was thrilled. About a year after her jail sentence, circa 1956**,** Beckham saw a television program advertising treatment for drug addicts in Camarillo Mental Hospital. "All you have to do is go to the general hospital," she heard the voice on the television say, "turn yourself in, and kick your habit." Beckham wanted to participate, believing that she was "going to be cured" by the program's medical professionals. She got a ride to Los Angeles General Hospital—where her mom had been blinded about twenty-five years prior—and signed up for the program. A nurse handed her paperwork asking her to provide details about her habit and confirm by signature that she was an "admitted junkie."[102] She filled out the forms without reservation, assuming that she was getting one step closer to a cure.

Beckham thought that the program was voluntary and geared towards her benefit, but she found out quickly that there were other priorities at play. The first sign of something strange

[102] "Interview #3 with Betty D, Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon.

came when staffers led her to a locked day room in the general hospital's psychiatric ward. Beckham saw "all manner of disturbed people" around her. "They have people in there that they've just picked up on the street and are suicidal," she recalled, "They have a lady in there that's having a nervous breakdown… [And then] there are a couple of junkies in there, saying, 'How the hell did we get in here?'" Hours earlier, Beckham had been excited to "take the cure," but, increasingly, she felt like she had been tricked, as did the other addict patients. "This is just like being in jail," she thought, "This is just a hospital. This isn't a cure or anything."[103] Hospital staff told Beckham that she would be transferred to Camarillo in a few days, but Beckham was already suspicious of the supposed "cure" that awaited her there. Beckham told the nurses that she had changed her mind, and asked to leave immediately. Instead, they sent her to a small courtroom with a judge located inside the hospital. It turned out that, by Beckham signing the admittance paperwork, she had also pled guilty to vagrancy addiction—the same charge she had been arrested for twice. The advertisement's call to "turn yourself in" was literal, though Beckham had not understood it as such. In the hospital courtroom, "all the judge wanted to know was," Beckham recalled, "was I an admitted addict and… did I, from my own volition, want to go to Camarillo to withdraw from drugs? I said, 'No!'" In response, the judge "mumbled and jumbled" that it was "in the best interest of the people and the State of California that she be sentenced to ninety days in Camarillo regardless. Beckham started to understand the situation. "It was a trap," she said. "A lot of junkies talked about that later. Once you committed yourself to Los Angeles hospital, you were in. They weren't going to let you go."[104] She came to the hospital

[103] "Interview #3 with Betty D, Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon.
[104] "Interview #2 with Betty D, Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon.

to be helped, but found herself locked up instead. She left the room feeling like confinement had been the point all along.

California officials would likely have seen the encounter as a successful implementation of the institutional treatment model, but Beckham saw it as a "trap" that destroyed her hope in the entire endeavor. To authorities, there was no contradiction between being treated and being forcibly confined. Nor was there an issue with a judge sentencing Beckham to serve the "best interest of the people and the State of California," for one of the primary goals of treatment was to isolate addicts from the rest of society. That was clear to Beckham, as was the chasm between what she thought medical care would be like, and what it actually was like—at least for her, an "admitted addict." Treatment was not something she was entitled to, but something she would be subjected to. She did not have the right to make decisions about whether she wanted to receive it. It seemed to her, and many other addicts in Los Angeles, that the Camarillo "cure" was a sleight of hand, tricking them into participating in their own forced confinement.

Though the mandatory treatment model assumed that addicts would not seek out a cure voluntarily, many addicts put a great deal of time, thought, and effort into ending their addiction. Beckham, for instance, had tried to regulate her habit from the moment she started using heroin. She also had her own reasons for trying Camarillo's cure—reasons that did not frame addiction as a disease in need of treatment, but as something else entirely. After her first stint in jail was over, Beckham joined the Nation of Islam (NOI). During the time when she felt like she had reached the "end point" of her life, Beckham met a man handing out NOI pamphlets on the street. By the mid-1950s, NOI's presence in Los Angeles was growing rapidly, with Muslim

cafés and groceries popping up in the South Central neighborhood where Beckham lived.[105] She was intrigued by NOI's ban on alcohol and drugs, and even more so by the "revolutionary" message behind the ban. The pamphleteer, Charles Cigarns, seemed to know that Beckham was an addict, because he began "rapping to [her] about degradation and the degrading experience of dope fiends, and how the Black man had to uplift the Black woman." She recalled that he "wanted personally, almost, to get rid of every dope fiend, every drunk, every prostitute; open all Black businesses in Black communities [and] run whitey out."[106] NOI's stance on drugs was part of their larger argument about the havoc that white America had wreaked on Black people, who abused narcotics in order to numb the pain of racial oppression. Addiction was a form of internalized self-hatred and capitulation to white supremacy; sobriety was a defiant act of self-love.[107] Beckham was drawn to NOI's "revolutionary" vision and moved in with Cigarns shortly after their meeting.[108] It was during this period that Beckham saw the advertisement for Camarillo's addiction program on television. She decided to sign up for Camarillo because of the change already happening within her, which was inspired by how NOI imbued sobriety with purpose and power.

Other Angeleno addicts also sought out help to end their addiction without anyone forcing them to do so. Lena Lindsay, a Black woman in her mid-twenties, had been addicted to heroin for years. She lived with her mother, along with Lindsay's two young children. To fund

---

[105] "Interview #2 with Betty D, Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon. NOI converts were opening pork-free restaurants and groceries, as well as storefront mosques, in Black Los Angeles, though the official Muhammad's Temple of Islam #27 would not open until 1957. For more on the growth of NOI in Los Angeles, see Pamela J. Prickett, *Believing in South Central: Everyday Islam in the City of Angels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021). For post-war growth of NOI and its context within the broader Black freedom struggle, see: Garrett Felber, *Those Who Know Don't Say: The Nation of Islam, the Black Freedom Movement, and the Carceral State* (Durham, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019).
[106] "Interview #2 with Betty D, Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon.
[107] William L. White, Mark Sanders and Tanya Sanders, "Addiction in the African American Community: The Recovery Legacies of Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X," *Counselor,* 7, no 5 (2006), 53-58.
[108] "Interview #2 with Betty D, Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon.

her habit, she worked off and on as a prostitute. Sometimes, when she really needed a fix, she spent the little money that she had on heroin instead of groceries. Increasingly, Lindsay worried about the example she was setting for her kids. "I knew in the back of my head," she explained, "that there was no way for me to raise anything else, other than something that I was." Around 1955, Lindsay heard about Camarillo's program and saw it as a chance to finally "get clean." She started looking into how to gain admittance. When that led her to a courthouse where she had to plead guilty to vagrancy addiction, Lindsay still felt that she was in control. "I went… to court because I wanted to go somewhere," she recalled, "so it wasn't like anybody forced me to go anywhere… [You] had to go to court to be sentenced to or admitted to [Camarillo], and that's what I did."[109]

Another heroin addict, John Peterson, a Black man who started using morphine while in the Army, found his way to Camarillo after multiple attempts to get clean on his own. After leaving the service and settling in Los Angeles, Peterson became addicted to heroin. His addiction was interfering with his plans to attend college, so he tried to stop using. First, he weaned himself off heroin by replacing it with drugstore cough syrup, but that did not work for long. Then he attended a clinic whose staff promised he would be cured if he let them inject a "mysterious brown liquid" into his veins. Despite repeated visits, the injections did nothing to help him. When he heard about Camarillo's program, Peterson thought about Charlie Parker's 1946 jazz composition "Relaxin' at Camarillo." It encouraged him that one of the greats had gone to the very same hospital for addiction treatment, and he decided to give it a try.[110] Like

[109] Lena Lindsay. Interview by author, Los Angeles, August 27, 2019.
[110] Jason Cherkis, "Dying to Be Free," *Huffington Post*, January 28, 2015, https://projects.huffingtonpost.com/dying-to-be-free-heroin-treatment.

Beckham, Lindsay and Peterson had their own deeply-held reasons for pursuing treatment. They turned to Camarillo in the sincere hope that it had the cure they desired.

In each case, Beckham, Lindsay, and Peterson were sentenced to Camarillo to undergo a program of treatment and cure that they realized fairly quickly did not exist. The first stage of institutional treatment was to gradually withdraw the addict from heroin, a task that clinicians could accomplish without difficulty. Over the first week of Beckham's sentence in Camarillo, nurses weaned her off heroin and gave her sedatives three times a day to ease the pain of withdrawal. She spent her days in a daze, watching television and looking out the windows at the sunny, tree-lined hospital grounds. It was "kind of pleasant," Beckham thought.[111] It was an improvement from sitting on the cold cement of an addict-only jail cell, listening to the howls of women being denied pain medication. However, Beckham started to understand that she would not be receiving targeted medical care after the withdrawal period ended. Instead, during the remaining eighty-plus days of her sentence, she was put to work in the women's senile ward, where she bathed elderly patients and escorted them to electro-shock sessions. According to California's Department of Mental Hygiene, this phase of the program "kept [the patient] in the hospital for the purpose of building [them] physically as well as mentally."[112] After she was released, Beckham started using heroin immediately.

Lena Lindsay had a very similar experience to Beckham's in Camarillo State Hospital. Though she had not been as troubled by the fact that she was sentenced to the institution, as Beckham had been, Lindsay had also sought out admission because she thought she could be cured. Instead, she arrived to find that "there was no program" at all. Like Beckham, she was

[111] "Interview #2 with Betty D, Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon.
[112] Sections 5350-5360, "Progress report on juvenile narcotic problem," Assembly Subcommittee on Crime and Correction of the Interim Committee on Social Welfare, March 1952, California Assembly, 20.

gradually withdrawn from heroin with sedatives and other psychiatric drugs, and then started to work with incoming patients in the admitting ward and to help "give shock treatment" to them. When it came to addicts, Lindsay had the overwhelming impression that the staff did not "[know] what they were doing."[113] Her hopes for the program dissolved as she realized that the advertised cure was not real. At some point, she realized that it would be easy to have her boyfriend sneak in drugs during visiting hours. She spent much of her ninety-day commitment high, working as a hospital aide, and waiting until she was released. When Lindsay left Camarillo, her life was not any different than it was before she had entered—except now she did not expect medical professionals to have a solution to her addiction.

John Peterson's time in Camarillo was more harrowing than Beckham's and Lindsay's, though it was just as futile. Like them, he did not receive any targeted medical care other than gradual withdrawal. He also spent his days as a volunteer staff member of sorts, helping hold down other patients during their electro-shock sessions. In the absence of an actual program of addiction treatment, it seemed that this was the only thing hospital staffers could think to do with addicts. They were more competent at daily tasks than many of the other patients in the overcrowded hospital, so they were put to work. Nighttime was a frightening time for Peterson, though. Rather than "relaxin' at Camarillo," Peterson had to scramble to ensure that he would not fall victim to the hospital's more brutal patients who often sexually assaulted others at night. He befriended a patient who had avoided a murder charge on grounds of insanity; at lights out, when dozens of men shared a single room to sleep, the man helped guard Peterson's bed. Far from the hospital being a place of therapy and cure, it actively put Peterson and others in danger. When

[113] Lena Lindsay. Interview by author, Los Angeles, August 27, 2019.

Peterson left, he immediately started using heroin again. His experience in Camarillo "didn't many any sense to me," he recalled. "It wasn't treatment. I don't know what you'd call it."[114]

For all that government officials had done to implement a program of compulsory hospitalization, they had not determined what actually constituted effective treatment. This had real consequences for addicts, who had received the message that they were sick and needed medical care. Authorities might have admitted their skepticism about a cure for addiction while haggling over who should take responsibility for California's addicts, but that message was not in the pitch that people like Betty Beckham, Lena Lindsay, or John Peterson heard about Camarillo. Instead, they heard something more akin to the way that institutional treatment was portrayed in 1950s popular culture—something like Dr. Rex Morgan, M.D. promising addicts a sure-fire cure if they stayed in the hospital and followed the doctor's orders. Yet even in such portrayals the actual content of institutional treatment was a black hole. People were sent there and they were supposed to come back cured, but how exactly a cure would be achieved on a day-to-day level was left unsaid. For an elected official or bureaucrat, it was also easier to ignore, as long as addicts were going *somewhere* in the name of treatment. But for addicts who turned to places like Camarillo hoping that medical professionals had a cure to offer them, that realization came as a nasty shock.

Looking at the futility of hospital treatment through addicts' eyes reveals the unintended consequences of the mid-twentieth-century disease framework. The idea that addicts were sick people in need of professional medical treatment often made addicts feel more hopeless once they realized that the treatment available to them did not work. None of them had expected jail or

[114] Cherkis, "Dying to Be Free."

prison to end their addiction. But to hear that someone could "take the cure" at a hospital with physicians and psychiatrists ready to put their expert knowledge to work—that could get a person's hopes up. When they left, disillusioned with medicine's promises, the diagnosis of addiction could feel more like a death sentence. While officials fretted about what to do with "dead ender" addicts, Beckham, Lindsay, and Peterson actually felt the weight of being at the "end point," as Beckham put it. They were truly afraid that they were doomed to their current life forever.

Addicts' loss of faith in medical treatment and the possibility of a clear-cut cure intensified their feelings of self-loathing and pessimism about the future**.** Peterson was haunted by the feeling that no matter what he did, it remained "an impossibility" to get sober."[115] He had gone from DIY attempts to withdraw himself from heroin in his bedroom to experimenting with quick-cures in shady storefront clinics to the supposed gold standard of the era, institutional treatment, and yet he was still addicted. Meanwhile, his dream to graduate from college was long gone. Lindsay felt like she was "the dregs of the earth." She would remind herself that she had never hurt anybody, never committed any act of violence, but she knew that people saw her as a "dope fiend," and therefore looked at her with fear and contempt. "We were ugly people," she remembered. "Nobody wanted to be around us or with us." The pain of rejection and isolation was exacerbated by the feeling that there was no escape to be found. After leaving Camarillo, Lindsay had concluded that "there was no place for us to go."[116] The places where government officials sent addicts were, in the most fundamental sense, just that—places that kept them separate from the rest of society. That was not the kind of place that offered any solace to

[115] Cherkis, "Dying to Be Free," Jason Cherkis.
[116] Lena Lindsay. Interview by author, Los Angeles, August 27, 2019.

Lindsay. What Lindsay meant was that "there was no place" where addicts could take refuge, where they could get the help that they wanted, and where they could work towards a different life for themselves and their loved ones. In the absence of such a place, it was hard to not feel hopeless.

Reid Kimball, another Angeleno heroin addict, cycled through Camarillo three times before he finally attempted suicide. Kimball first admitted himself into the hospital in 1957 after his wife, Ila, had left him. He had been with her for three years, during which time he had convinced her to leave her singing gig at a Hollywood nightclub to work for him as a prostitute. He also introduced her to heroin, to which she became addicted. Kimball exploited Ila and treated her badly, though he loved her, too. When she left, he "became a real gutter hype," homeless and cut off from friends and family. He heard about Camarillo's addiction treatment program and decided to admit himself "for a cure." Instead, it "did absolutely nothing."[117]

Still, he would return to Camarillo twice more out of desperation. After his first hospital commitment, Ila had returned to Kimball. He was "so happy" that she had given him another chance, yet he found himself punishing her for leaving him in the first place. He was "very cruel" to her, telling her that she was only welcome to stay with him until she had "kick[ed] her habit," and that he would date other women in the meantime. One night, when Kimball left her alone, Ila checked into a motel and overdosed fatally on pills. Kimball's life "went to pieces" when he heard the news of Ila's death. He felt responsible, so he drank whiskey and used heroin to blackout every night until he was "in such bad shape" that he readmitted himself to Camarillo. Whatever Kimball thought might happen the second time around, he left after ninety days in the

[117] Reid Kimball, *Seven Voices of Synanon*, 10.

exact same state. He spent each night "dead drunk, full of heroin," and waking up on his bathroom floor with open wounds on his head. He started to think along the lines of postwar officials—someone like him should just find a place where he could wait out his wretched life without causing more pain: "I was afraid to kill myself, and I decided that I would just go to Camarillo for the rest of my life." But Camarillo did not want Kimball for life. In fact, after he was released for the third time, hospital staffers made it clear to Kimball that they would not accept him again. Kimball decided on suicide. He rented a motel room and took as many sleeping pills as he could before blacking out, perhaps as he imagined Ila had. When he woke up days later in a bed in the Los Angeles General Hospital, tubes "in every orifice of [his] body," he thought, "I even failed that!"[118]

In a sense, the pessimism felt by addicts like Kimball mirrored that of postwar government officials. Both feared that addicts were fundamentally incurable and some wondered, as Kimball did, whether permanent confinement was the only solution for the most intractable cases. Yet what was primarily a logistical problem for authorities was an existential one for addicts. It was their existence cast as doomed, and their bodies and minds marked as disposable. They carried the weight of a double burden: the day-to-day stigma and plight of being a "dope fiend," as well as the knowledge that the treatment meant to cure their addiction did not work. Institutional treatment was no consolation to them, as much as they had wanted it to be. Where officials continued to expand the system of mandatory treatment regardless of its efficacy, many addicts had given up on it altogether even when they had nothing else to take its place as a possible solution.

[118] Reid Kimball, *Seven Voices of Synanon*, p. 117.

Still, in spite of their despair, Angeleno addicts kept their eyes open for alternatives. Their desire to quash their addiction had not disappeared, even if their faith in an institutional medical cure had. When they heard about a place for addicts on the beach, they were intrigued, and also skeptical. They had reason to be suspicious of any place that claimed to have special insight into how to get addicts off drugs. What they found in Synanon, however, seemed genuinely different than anything they had experienced before. By 1959, Reid Kimball, Lena Lindsay, and Betty Beckham had all moved into Synanon.[119] (John Peterson, whose story is continued in Chapter 3, arrived in 1961.)

Kimball stumbled upon Synanon's storefront on the beachfront promenade of the Ocean Park Pier. He had recently been released from the general hospital after his overdose, and was drinking copiously with six other "winos" in a flophouse nearby. When the group ran out of liquor one morning, Kimball left to get more, but he was so physically weak that he started shaking and retching on the sidewalk. He stopped on a bench to rest. Suddenly, the doors of the store in front of him opened. Music poured out, followed by a man and a woman, their "arms around each other's waist," who walked in a small circle around the block where Kimball was sitting. When they went back into the store, they left the doors open, right in front of him. He staggered over to look inside, where approximately forty people were chatting on couches and dancing. Kimball spotted his former heroin dealer on a divan, walked over to him, and asked him what kind of place this was. "This is for addicts," the man responded. Perfect, Kimball thought, because he needed to score. "No," the man said, "Nobody's got any dope here… They're all clean." Kimball kept badgering him to share his supply and the man kept trying to explain that "they were clean for a reason." Finally, a frustrated Kimball left the place to find a dealer on the

[119] "Synanon Record," in Casriel, *So Fair a House,* 182-183.

street. The place stuck in his head, though. It "made absolutely no sense" to him; "nobody had a fix, and yet they were all hypes."[120] He went back the next day and stayed there.

When Beckham decided to visit Synanon, she was interested in getting clean so she could devote herself more fully to the Nation of Islam. After being disappointed by Camarillo, Beckham worked towards becoming a full-on "sister in the Temple." She wrote her Saviour's Letter, which declared one's acceptance of the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, and adopted the name Betty X. "There was something that struck a chord in me," she explained. "They would preach love of brother. I couldn't go along completely with a lot of the facets of the program, but this one hit me where I lived… I think I started then to really accept myself for what I was, whatever I was." She started to make plans for the future with her new boyfriend, Robert, a leader in the Temple. They talked about getting married, having children, and traveling to Nigeria to preach the teachings to "all Black mankind."[121] The only obstacle was her addiction. She managed to stop using "for a very short period," but she could not make it stick. "The philosophy was there [in NOI]," she recalled, "but somehow it hadn't swerved me around."[122] It was through her brother Wilbur, who was also addicted to heroin, that she found out about the "little place down on the beach" where "addicts were trying to help themselves."[123] It was Robert who dropped her off at the clubhouse, when she saw the men and women lit by candles, debating concepts and books. A couple of people started chatting with her, "very much interested in the fact that [she] was an addict."[124] Beckham was ambivalent at first, but like Kimball something drew her back to Synanon's door.

---

[120] Reid Kimball, *Seven Voices of Synanon*, 19-22.
[121] "Bettye Coleman," *Seven Voices of Synanon*, 39-40.
[122] "Interview #3 with Betty D, Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon.
[123] "Bettye Coleman," *Seven Voices of Synanon*, 38.
[124] Interview #1 with Betty D, Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon.

Lindsay mulled over the idea of Synanon for months, intrigued by what she had heard about the place but not yet ready to give up heroin. The first time she heard the name Synanon, it was on television. "I was sitting in the house one night, loaded," she recalled, "and the newscaster came on… and he started talking about this place on the beach that was supposed to be helping dope fiends." She was dubious about the newscaster's credibility, because "he didn't know what he was talking about," but she wondered about the place itself: "I stuck it in the back of my head… I wasn't ready right *then*, but I was going to try that place one day." About five months later, in December 1959, one of Lindsay's friends and fellow heroin addicts reappeared in her neighborhood after having "disappeared for a while." Lindsay had assumed that she had been arrested and sent to jail. Instead, "she told us she had been at this place called Synanon," where "dope fiends [had] started gathering… and having conversations." There were cigarettes and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches there, too. After a couple of weeks, Lindsay packed a suitcase, "got a fix" of heroin, and asked her mom to drive her to Synanon. She had no real expectations, just a vague sense that it was at least worth a shot. "I didn't know what I was getting into, but I knew that I was looking for some place, and I was going to try it."[125] Lindsay moved in that day.

Each individual had a different journey to Synanon, but they were all inspired to stay there by similar factors, all of which bucked the institutional treatment model. First, they were drawn to the fact that addicts were the ones setting the tone of the place. They heard from other addicts that Synanon was a place "for addicts," where "addicts were trying to help themselves" by "gathering… and having conversations." None of them saw Synanon as a drug rehabilitation center. Instead, it seemed more like a place for socializing. When Kimball walked in to find

[125] Lena Lindsay. Interview by author, Los Angeles, August 27, 2019.

people dancing, he assumed that it was a bar. Both Beckham and Lindsay were struck by its casual, friendly quality. The group's non-medical nature was a point in its favor, especially for Beckham, who was so worried initially that Synanon might be a front for a "hospital" or a "treatment center"—places that she associated with medical authority—that she left the first night instead of moving in as she had intended. What appealed to them was the autonomous community of addicts they found in Synanon. It was something they found both surprising and exciting.

It was also significant that Kimball, Lindsay, and Beckham came to Synanon on their own terms and in their own time. Synanon's clubhouse was not isolated or walled off, but in the middle of a bustling Los Angeles beach town, open to any addict who stopped by. Lindsay heard about Synanon months before she decided to give it a try, and when she did, she got high on the drive over. The first thing Kimball did after arriving was try to buy drugs from another member and leave in anger when he was denied. Yet both were welcomed when they did decide to join. It was an early sign that Synanon would approach addiction differently than the institutional model did. Its members understood the dilemma that newcomers faced, since they faced it, too: they wanted to get sober and they also wanted to use drugs, and they knew that those two desires would be in competition for a long time. Perhaps most importantly, Synanon people would also insist that nobody could be compelled to stay clean. When she left Synanon that first night, Beckham initiated the process to stop using drugs only to change her mind shortly thereafter, just as she had done in the Camarillo program. But in Synanon, she was free to do so. The other residents tried to convince her to stay, but that was all they could do—and all that they wanted to do. Perhaps part of the reason that Beckham returned was that she had been allowed to leave. For that, it could be extended a little bit of trust.

The draw that Synanon had for people like Beckham, Lindsay, Kimball, and eventually Peterson, had everything to do with the world that they were used to living in—a world marked by stigma, surveillance, confinement, and failed cures. The literal marks of illicit drug use could be used as evidence of one's addiction in court, which then justified institutionalization in the name of treatment. And yet it was actual addicts—people who considered themselves addicted, not the people whom law enforcement accused as such—who bore witness to the futility of the institutional model. Addicts who started out hopeful that medical professionals would help them get clean were disappointed, and their trust in a medical cure eroded. It was in this climate that a place like Synanon was so intriguing and compelling. Its very existence was so unusual as to be almost unintelligible—even, or perhaps especially, to addicts themselves, like Kimball. For people whose lives were marked by ostracization and isolation, Synanon was a gathering spot, a place for sociality, in the middle of free society. For people who had grown disillusioned by medical authority, Synanon was run by addicts, for addicts, not for the sake of treatment, but community, with sobriety as a possible side-effect.

Chapter 1, in part, contains material as it appears in "How to Treat an Addict: Institutional Confinement, Mutual Aid, and Self Realization in Postwar Los Angeles. Mylet Jordan, *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2, December 2021, pp. 5-48.

Chapter 2:

"A Breath of Fresh Air": The AA Movement, Recovery Countercultures, and Creating Synanon in Postwar Los Angeles, 1935-1959

Vivian first heard about Synanon in the spring of 1958 from a "tall, handsome man all steamed up about a queer cat on the beach, a guy named Chuck." The man was Grey Thompson, and the "guy" about whom he was "all steamed up" about was Chuck Dederich. Vivian met Thompson at a meeting of Hypes and Alcoholics (Hy-Al), an underground recovery group in Los Angeles's eclectic Venice Beach-Ocean Park (Venice-OP) area for, as the name denoted, people addicted to heroin or alcohol or both. Before this encounter, Vivian had been living hard and lonely for years. She had been jailed several times for violations related to narcotics and prostitution, and she was in and out of the hospital for complications due to hepatitis, which she had contracted from a dirty needle, as well as a severe abdominal infection brought on by a back-alley abortion. Thompson's "bubbling enthusiasm" for Synanon, another hybrid recovery group based in Venice-OP, piqued Vivian's interest. He told Vivian that Synanon was "so different" from anything else in Los Angeles's mutual aid recovery scene "that it couldn't be explained. It was something that had to be experienced"[1] She was excited by the idea of living in community with others like her. Soon after meeting Thompson, Vivian and her boyfriend moved into a room near Synanon's beachfront clubhouse, around which Dederich, Thompson, and other Synanon members lived.[2]

In 1958, Synanon was one part of a flourishing, diverse mutual aid recovery movement in postwar Los Angeles whose existence has gone mostly unnoticed by scholars. While existing literature has tracked the explosive growth of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) in the 1940s United

[1] Guy Endore, *Synanon* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1968), 78.
[2] "Grey Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon.

States and California, specifically, it has paid far less attention to its outgrowths, especially with respect to how they experimented with and dissented from the traditional norms and tenets of AA. Synanon emerged out of what I call "recovery countercultures" within AA, and then created its own, more audacious version. Started as a spin-off group for rebellious AA members, Synanon rejected the idea that pursuing sobriety had to be paired with reassimilating into mainstream society. Dederich and his circle of AA friends merged AA's model with the Beat subculture of Venice-OP of which they were a part. They participated in LSD trials; studied Eastern philosophy and psychoanalytic texts; socialized and lived with people of different races, ethnicities, and sexes; and in everyday life prioritized the pursuit of self-realization, pleasure, leisure, and communal living. They also fully incorporated addicts into their community at time when AA refused to do so, partly for philosophical reasons against mixing different addictions, but also partly out of prejudice. In an era of institutional confinement and pervasive stereotypes about the dangerous "dope fiend," Synanon operated on the principles that addicts—like alcoholics—should be able to get sober on their own terms, forge their own philosophies about sobriety, and create their own communities and gathering spots in free society.

This chapter explores the difference between mainstream and countercultural wings of the mutual aid recovery movement in 1950s Los Angeles as a way of understanding Synanon's origins. A large part of the chapter focuses on Dederich's life, though, hopefully, in a way that differs from other accounts that attribute Synanon's founding entirely to his personality and biography. First, I approach Dederich as the Beat-friendly "queer cat on the beach," and not as the Gulf Oil salesman looking for his next product to sell. Almost two decades before Synanon existed, Dederich left against his life as a Midwestern corporation man and became a self-described beach bum. His path to AA and Synanon was one of nonconformity, not middle-class

respectability. Second, Dederich's biography showcases how Synanon was *not* his individual creation, but a collective endeavor made possible by the robust communal world of postwar AA, the addict and addict-alcoholic groups that built on AA's model, and the addicts who helped create and sustain Synanon from the very beginning.

The Social Worlds of AA and its Addict Offshoots in Postwar Los Angeles

Synanon came out of the world that AA created for recovering alcoholics in postwar Los Angeles, though in an unanticipated and contested fashion. AA grew in popularity over the 1940s and 1950s at the same time that alcoholics were becoming more sympathetic figures, people with an "allergy" to a legal substance instead of social deviants. Popular accounts of AA often equated the pursuit of sobriety with the quest to restore the ideal of middle-class masculinity; through AA, the recovered alcoholic could fulfill his roles as worker, father, and husband. To belong to AA was to do much more than attend meetings. AA was a robust social world in which alcoholics could find support and community. In postwar Los Angeles, the communal aspect of AA took on special prominence, resulting in the novel creation of informal and formal "recovery homes," where alcoholics lived and stayed sober together. By the early 1950s, Angeleno drug addicts were turning to AA, hoping that they could find a place in the mutual aid movement. While AA encouraged addicts to start their own groups using the AA model, it did not extend membership or material support when addict groups faced repression from law enforcement. When Synanon emerged, the addict contingent of the grassroots recovery movement was in a precarious place, under constant threat of harassment and lacking the social infrastructure to support their survival.

The Communal World of Los Angeles AA

Founded in 1935, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) skyrocketed in popularity during and after World War II, and nowhere more so than in California. Nationwide, AA grew from approximately 1,400 members in 1940 to over 160,000 in 1960.[3] By 1951, California had 446 chapters, or thirteen percent of all groups in existence.[4] According to one reporter, AA had become a "vital force in California life" since World War II, with "membership grow[ing] so fast that figures are obsolete by the time they reach print."[5] Los Angeles AA went from having a single chapter in 1939 to ninety-plus chapters in 1948, the same year that the city was chosen to host AA's West Coast headquarters.[6] The city was a hub of creativity and community in the state's blossoming AA scene. During the 1950s, Los Angeles AA spearheaded the creation of a new form in the grassroots recovery movement: the "recovery home," or the "Twelfth Step Home," where recovering alcoholics could live for a short while or even permanently, if they decided to dedicate their lives to helping others like them.[7]

AA came to prominence on a wave of post-WWII popular interest in psychological treatment, which moved from the isolated realms of sanitaria and rich, urban bohemia to mainstream, middle-class culture.[8] Initially, the group "talking cure" burst into national

---

[3] "Estimated Worldwide AA Individual and Group Membership," Document SMF-132, Alcoholics Anonymous General Service Office, December 2019, www.aa.org.
[4] Cooke, Roger, "AA in California," July 3, 1952, *Healdsburg Tribune*, No. 41, University of California Riverside (UCR) Digital Newspaper Collection, 1.
[5] Cooke, "AA in California," *Healdsburg Tribune.*
[6] "Two Speakers Featured at Friday Dinner," October 27, 1948, San Bernardino Sun, Vol. 55, No. 49, UCR Digital Newspaper Collection,18; Shippey, Lee. "Leeside," November 10, 1948, Los Angeles Times, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, A5.
[7] "Alcoholism and California: Recovery Establishments for Alcoholics," Division of Alcoholic Rehabilitation, April 1963, https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/102648381.
[8] Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology;* Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust;* Peter Phillips Sheehy, "The Triumph of Group Therapeutics: Therapy, the Social Self, and Liberalism in America, 1910-1960," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 2002.

prominence after military psychiatrists used it to treat soldiers experiencing crippling fear and anxiety on the battlefield.[9] With too many cases and too few clinicians and hours in the day to hold individual sessions, servicemen often shared their troubles with each other in tents at military base camps and felt "inspired by [their] fellow sufferers" afterwards.[10] AA's group model overlapped with—and potentially influenced—the open-air sessions during the war. AA granted active-duty servicemen free subscriptions to the *AA Grapevine,* a newsletter founded in 1944 primarily to reach out to soldiers. Military psychiatrists also incorporated AA concepts into their literature with pamphlets like "12 Rules on Meeting Fear in Battle," which was modeled on AA's 12 Step recovery program.[11] After the war, veterans continued to seek out psychiatric treatment. In 1946, sixty percent of Veterans' Administration (VA) patients were neuropsychiatric cases, while 44,000 men received psychotherapy in VA outpatient clinics, where they discussed not only combat-related trauma but also marriage and general life problems.[12] Their experiences in treatment, as well as the media coverage of it, familiarized millions of Americans with psychological concepts and practices.[13] It also helped normalize talk therapy for a spectrum of mental health issues. The pre-WWII sentiment that psychiatric care was a marker of severe mental illness and social deviancy gave way to a heightened awareness that "normal" people needed help with emotional suffering, too.

---

[9] For more on the impact of World War II on the normalization and popularization of psychology, see: Ben Shephard, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Plant, "Preventing the Inevitable," in *Science and Emotions after 1945.*
[10] Sheehy, "The Triumph of Group Therapeutics," 116.
[11] Kevin Kaufman, "Rigorous Honesty: A Cultural History of Alcoholics Anonymous, 1935-1960," 2011. Loyola University Chicago, Ph.D. dissertation, 179-180.
[12] Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology*, 243-244.
[13] Sheehy, "The Triumph of Group Therapeutics;" Martin Halliwell, *Therapeutic Revolutions: Medicine, Psychiatry, and American Culture, 1945-1970* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013).

The sympathetic figure of the shell-shocked, hard-drinking veteran helped pave the way for AA's entry into the postwar mainstream. [14] As opposed to the Depression-era stereotype of the Skid Row "bum," the white alcoholic veteran was someone for whom general public could feel sorry and root. In 1949, a nationally-syndicated comic strip called *Wash Tubbs* depicted the power of AA in just these terms. When Wilty, a white veteran, started to spiral out of control due to his heavy drinking, his friend Ben, a fellow white veteran and recovering alcoholic, persuaded him to join AA He even used language that might have been familiar to someone who had participated in battlefield group sessions, emphasizing "how much it helps to talk with someone who's been in the same boat."[15] By the end of the comic, Wilty had secured a job through his friends in AA, moved back into his home, and reunited with his wife and daughter. In 1950, Norman Vincent Peale, the conservative Christian minister who popularized "the power of positive thinking," praised AA for manifesting another "good, old-fashioned American success story" like Wilty's. His friend had been a drunkard, but after "the AAs worked with him," he was able to "release the magic of achievement within him[self]" and "change failure into success" in business.[16] For Peale, the AA recovery process was a parable proving the importance of personal responsibility and the rightness of the U.S. social and economic system, which rewarded the man who overcame obstacles through Christian faith and force of will. In postwar popular culture, there was a strong association between AA-style sobriety and a return to middle-class, male respectability.

---

[14] Halliwell, *Therapeutic Revolutions,* 56-57; Rotskoff, *Love on the Rocks*, pp. 89-96; William M. Tuttle, *"Daddy's Gone to War": The Second World War in the Lives of America's Children* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). The popular focus on white alcoholic veterans should be seen within a broader context of racially discriminatory treatment towards Black soldiers and veterans of World War II, especially given the racist enforcement of postwar narcotics laws.

[15] *Wash Tubbs*, May 11, 1949, *Comics with Problems*, Issue 71, December 2015, http://www.ep.tc/problems/71/.

[16] Norman Vincent Peale, "Confident Living: The Magic of Achievement is in You," November 24, 1950, *Desert Sun*, No. 17, UCR Historical Newspapers, 4.

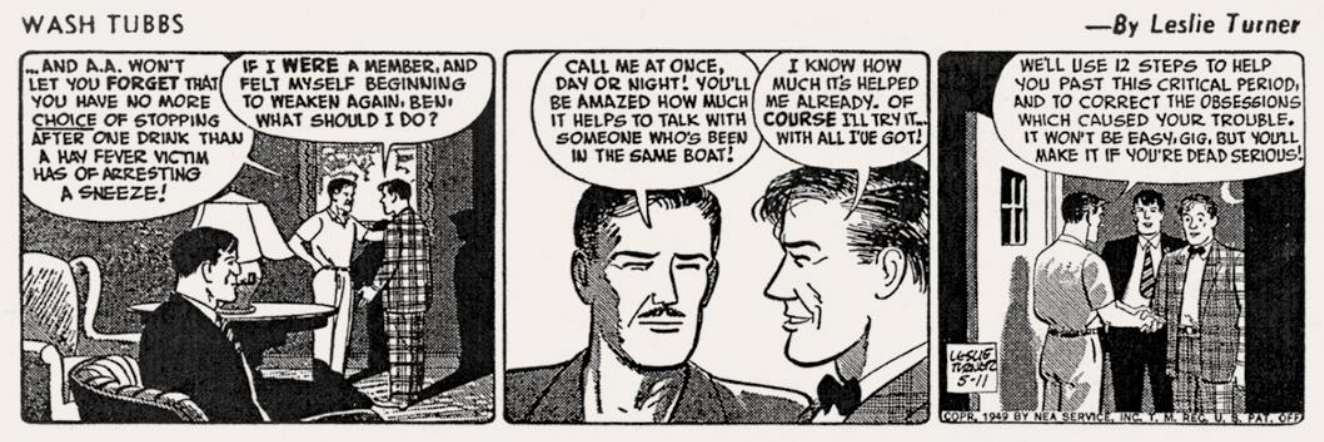


Figure 4: *Wash Tubbs* comic strip, May 11, 1949.

It seems likely that Los Angeles was a major hub of the AA movement because it was so affected by World War II, both in terms of demography and urban landscape. Even after the war ended, millions of "war migrants" remained, many of them veterans and their families who had left their hometowns, traditions, and relatives for a new life in California.[17] Newcomers experienced profound dislocation as well as a desire to create new communities and a genuine sense of belonging. An acute housing shortage marked the 1940s, as the city's new residents, who had lived in hastily-built, temporary housing and trailers during the war, tried to convert their "wartime improvisation[s]" into permanent neighborhoods. [18] These new towns often did not have direct telephone lines, fire stations, or enough schools to accept children on anything more than a rotating basis for half-days. Meanwhile, the pervasive association between veterans and heavy drinking was not without basis**.** After the war, the rates of alcoholism and "drunk arrests," arrests covering a number of charges that officers deemed liquor-related, rose dramatically after the war, to the point that the state created the Division of Alcoholic

[17] McWilliams, *California: The Great Exception,* 23.
[18] McWilliams, *California: The Great Exception,* 14-15.

Rehabilitation in 1954 to address this "major public health problem."[19] Alcoholics who struggled to find employment or provide for their families (whether materially, for men, or emotionally, for women) faced the threat of failing at the suburban, middle-class dream. In this environment, AA called like a beacon. It was a place to get sober and make friends in an unfamiliar, chaotic world, as well as an opportunity to achieve normative success.[20]

Extending far beyond weekly meetings, Los Angeles AA was a community in which many members lived a great deal of their lives. Newcomers entered a robust social world in which members met for daily lunches, hosted card tournaments and shared holidays and birthdays together. AA's headquarters in Los Angeles was located in a former nightclub and restaurant, complete with dance floor, "well-furnished lounge," and a "long bar."[21] Open from ten in the morning to midnight every day, the clubhouse was available to all AA members to use as they wished: reading books from the AA library, working through the Twelve Steps with fellow members, drinking coffee, and hanging out with each other. Every Saturday night, the clubhouse hosted raucous open-house parties for people in and out of AA, including members'

---

[19] "Alcoholic Rehabilitation: Treatment, Research, Education, 1954-1959," Division of Alcoholic Rehabilitation, Department of Public Health, State of California, Berkeley, 1959; "Public Urged to Co-operate in Treatment of Alcoholism," October 23, 1947, *Los Angeles Times*, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, A1.

[20] AA was also one of the only games in town for alcoholics. Alcoholism became more medicalized in the 1940s, as academic researchers developed a disease concept that equated the condition with an allergy or some type of pre-existing sensitivity to liquor. Yet there was no clear-cut treatment program or cure, nor was there a great desire on the part of psychiatrists to take on alcoholic cases. As AA started to get more popular, many clinicians seemed to take the opportunity to offload alcoholic cases, long considered unseemly and intractable, onto the grassroots organization. In 1955, fifty percent of psychiatrists in Southern California refused to accept a single alcoholic case, while the other half allowed just one or two patients in their practice. A full eighty percent did not believe private practice was the appropriate place to treat addicts; eighty percent had also referred alcoholic cases to AA. See: Rennie Taylor, "Job Handed to Alcoholics Anonymous: Psychiatrists Giving Up On Treating Alcoholism," May 5, 1955, *San Bernardino Sun*, Vol. 61, No. 212, UCR Digital Newspaper Collection, 12. For secondary literature on the contested psychiatric efforts to treat "drunkards" and "inebriates" in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Katherina A. Chavigny, "Reforming Drunkards in Nineteenth-Century America," pp. 108-123, and Sarah W. Tracy, "Building a Boozatorium: State Medical Reform for Iowa's Inebriates, 1902-1920," pp. 124-164, in Altering American Consciousness: The History of Alcohol and Drug Use in the United States, 1800-2000, eds. Sarah W. Tracy and Caroline Jean Acker (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004).

[21] Lee Shippey, "Leeside," November 10, 1948, *Los Angeles Times*, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, A5.

families. The group put on massive New Years' Eve bashes, too, which local bigwigs and the occasional celebrity attended.[22] Local chapters opened official clubhouses of their own. In 1947, a co-ed AA group in San Pedro, the city's military and defense production hub, announced plans to build a central clubhouse to host meetings, as well as dances and public forums.[23] The group had grown to nearly one hundred members from just six people four years earlier.[24]

Close-knit bonds formed between AA members that were predicated on everyday interactions. A contemporary sociologist described the personal connections within AA as so "unusually intimate" that they constituted "a new way of life—a new subculture."[25] Local chapters operated twenty-four-hour hotlines so they could send help to desperate callers; one AA woman recounted that she had sat on top of multiple people to "prevent them from diving out of windows."[26] Others recalled cleaning up vomit from people suffering from withdrawals, and staying with them overnight or for multiple days.[27] Local groups also created autonomous DIY spaces for each other, some of which functioned like a co-op. In 1949, an AA men's chapter in the San Fernando Valley, a suburb in Los Angeles County on the north side of the Hollywood Hills, created a DIY clubhouse that they called "the Dunsmore." Its establishment was a cooperative effort from beginning to end. The building was a rundown single-family home, complete with kitchen, living room, bedroom, and bathroom, that had been slated for demolition. The group had it loaded onto a flat-bed truck and hauled to a vacant lot that one of them owned.

---

[22] "City Shouts an Old Year Into History," January 1, 1954, *Los Angeles Times*, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, A1.
[23] "Alcoholics Group Attendance Gains," April 26, 1947, San Pedro *News Pilot*, Vol. 20, No. 45, UCR Digital Newspaper Collection, 10.
[24] "AA Program Success Told," March 16, 1946, San Pedro *News Pilot*, Vol. 19, No. 14, UCR Digital Newspaper Collection, 5.
[25] Maxwell, Milton A. "Alcoholics Anonymous: An Interpretation," Society, Culture, and Drinking Patterns, ed. David J. Pittman and Charles R. Snyder (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1962), 577.
[26] Jack Alexander, "Alcoholics Anonymous: Freed Slaves of Drink, Now They Free Others," *Saturday Evening Post*, March 1, 1941, 25.
[27] "CED Edited Works: Ten Years Sober," Box 207; "Grey Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon.

Another member who worked in construction led the group in remodeling the house. "It was a place where drunks could dry out while Club members took turns watching them," a Dunsmore historian explained. "It was similar, in some ways, to social services."[28] It was also a place for members to gather together to hold poker games, birthday parties, and dinners. The Dunsmore was a collectively governed space in which, at any given moment, people might be sleeping, detoxing, cleaning, cooking, or watching over one another.

During the 1950s, neighborhood AA chapters in Los Angeles started to create sober communal living arrangements for recovering alcoholics in need of shelter and support. Distinctly non-institutional, they were primarily located in residential neighborhoods. They had libraries, hi-fi record players, television sets, and radios; a few had swimming pools, art studios, and game rooms.[29] They were embedded in urban life, not relegated to the Skid Row district where the city's shelters and missions were located or exiled to some distant plot of land, like state mental hospitals and federal narcotics farms were. Much of the early information about these places comes from California's Division of Alcoholic Rehabilitation (DAR), which initiated a statewide survey in 1961 to study a "new and little studied phenomena" that they called "recovery homes."[30] DAR found that Los Angeles was unique in its number of these establishments. Of the twenty-five homes surveyed by DAR, thirteen were in Los Angeles; the only other cities with more than a single house were San Diego and Santa Barbara, each with two homes.[31] In at least one case in Los Angeles, two homes operated in community with one

[28] "'Dunsmore,' The Oldest, Continuously-Operating Clubhouse West of the Mississippi, Started as a Men's Stag," *Recovery Times*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (March 2012), 1.
[29] *Recovery establishments for alcoholics*, 26.
[30] *Recovery establishments for alcoholics,* 9.
[31] *Recovery establishments for alcoholics*, 47.

another. The 1951 opening of Friendly House, a women's recovery home near MacArthur Park, was followed by the establishment of a men's home just blocks away a few years later.[32]

These recovery homes were direct outgrowths of AA's intimate community, though they were autonomously run. In each establishment, DAR researchers noted the "strong, if indirect, influence of the philosophy of Alcoholics Anonymous." Every house encouraged residents to attend AA meetings; twenty-three of them held AA meetings inside the homes.[33] However, they were not formally affiliated with AA, in keeping with the organization's Sixth Tradition recommending that AA chapters "never endorse, finance, or lend the AA name to any related facility or outside enterprise."[34] Founded by individual AA members, the homes were "small, self-sufficient" establishments.[35] Typically, the houses were funded by a mixture of outside donations and pooling each other's money through a combination of resident fees and the personal income of the house manager.[36] The financial situation of the homes could be precarious. They were not funded by the state, with the minor exception of three homes that accepted residents' welfare checks as part of their fees.[37] Resident fees often functioned on a pay-what-and-when-you-can basis. Some houses found creative ways to sustain themselves: in a few cases, residents held bingo games to raise funds, while the residents of one house opened their own restaurant.[38]

---

[32] See: Townsend, Dorothy. "From Alcoholism: 'One for the Road… Back,'" March 31, 1959, Los Angeles Times, p. A1; "Alcoholics Center Damaged by Fire," April 4, 1955, San Bernardino *Sun*, Vol. 61, No. 185, UCR Digital Newspaper Collection, 3.
[33] *Recovery establishments for alcoholics*, Preface.
[34] "Twelve Traditions," Alcoholics Anonymous, https://www.aa.org/the-twelve-traditions.
[35] *Recovery establishments for alcoholics*, 11.
[36] *Recovery establishments for alcoholics*, 7.
[37] *Recovery establishments for alcoholics*, 28-29.
[38] *Recovery establishments for alcoholics*, 7.

The homes were a mixture of clubhouse, guesthouse, and commune. The majority of residents stayed for one to three months, with an average of forty-seven days in residency. However, almost seventy-percent of the establishments set no time limits on residency and at least one considered itself a "long-term" home.[39] By emphasizing the homes' temporary nature, DAR researchers missed signs of permanency, both in mission and resident population. For instance, DAR's report differentiated between "permanent staff," who did maintenance, kitchen, and clerical work, and AA "Old-Timers," who also lived in the homes permanently and did "odd jobs" around the house—even though both groups consisted of recovered alcoholics, many of whom had gotten sober in that same house. (The report called this group of staffers "former residents," though they still lived in the house, now designated as "permanent staff.")[40] DAR drew distinctions where residents likely did not, and therefore missed the fluidity of the environment of these homes. Residents who had been in the house for longer periods of time probably assumed a type of leadership status, which may have approximated the role of "staff," even though they were still active participants in the sober community just like newer members were. Clearly, a number of residents—the "Old-Timers"—considered these places their permanent homes. It is likely that these individuals had devoted their lives to Twelfth Step work, which asked members to "carry [the AA] message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs."[41] These recovery homes were embedded in the social fabric of AA and had a long-running sense of purpose and community.

Los Angeles had other sober communal homes that DAR did not include in their report, either because they were too unusual or because they were so informal that state officials had not

[39] Tables 13 and 14, *Recovery establishments for alcoholics,* 53-54.
[40] *Recovery establishments for alcoholics*, 20.
[41] AA members referred to missionary and service work as Twelfth Step work. "The Twelve Steps," Alcoholics Anonymous, https://www.aa.org/the-twelve-steps.

heard of them.[42] In one case, the report mentioned "a group of hotels" that researchers had excluded from their survey.[43] In 1949, an AA member named Pat Wigger converted three rundown hotels in downtown Los Angeles into a sober living community for homeless alcoholics; he started the project after discovering that multiple newcomers in his chapter were sleeping on the streets after night meetings.[44] The community followed the tenets of AA, but it also accepted non-alcoholic residents—perhaps homeless Angelenos who were not drinkers, alcoholics who were also addicted to drugs, or people who were just drug addicts. Because DAR researchers defined recovery homes as being only for alcoholics, they did not incorporate any details about Wigger's hotels into their study.[45] There were also AA members who welcomed multiple other members into their homes for weeks and months at a time. As the next section of this chapter shows, Synanon founder Chuck Dederich lived in a variety of such places during the late 1950s, some of which he started himself. These types of organic, casual communal living arrangements were an important part of Dederich's experience in AA, as well as the Los Angeles AA scene more broadly.

Los Angeles AA's formal and informal recovery homes kept alive the earliest expressions of the AA movement, which spread in the form of DIY sober communes. In a 1941 *Saturday Evening Post* article, which would catapult AA into national prominence, journalist Jack Alexander described how Bill Wilson and Dr. Robert Smith, the group's co-founders, had converted their homes into places of "free refuge for alcoholics." (The men were given

[42] In the preface to their study, DAR explained that they compiled their list of recovery homes through "information from alcoholism clinics, newspaper clippings and workers in the field of alcoholism." More informal set-ups would not have caught their attention, as Chuck Dederich's experiences in the AA communal living scene, covered later in this chapter, make clear. *Recovery establishments for alcoholics*, 8.
[43] *Recovery establishments for alcoholics,* 11.
[44] "The Social Model Approach to Substance Abuse Recovery: A Program of Research and Evaluation: Part One," Lee Ann Kaskutas, Dr. P.H., Alcohol Research Group (April 1999), A-1.
[45] *Recovery establishments for alcoholics*, 8.

pseudonyms in Alexander's article to protect their anonymity.) In the summer of 1935, Wilson moved into the Akron, Ohio home of Smith. Over the following six months, Wilson and Smith not only kept each other sober, but they also persuaded two other "converts" to move into Smith's home and stop drinking. In 1936, Wilson returned to his Brooklyn brownstone home and turned it into "a duplicate of the Akron ménage." Wilson tracked down part-time jobs to fund his burgeoning collective, while his wife, Lois, "play[ed] nurse to inebriates." By 1939, one hundred recovering alcoholics lived in Smith's and Wilson's homes, an arrangement that brought purpose and instability into the founders' lives. One night in Smith's house, a man "ran wild" with a kitchen knife until other residents calmed him down. The Wilsons went so deep in debt that they had to give up their home. At the time of the article's publication, the Wilsons' lifestyle reminded Alexander of "the primitive Christians," as they were constantly on the move, taking shelter in AA members' homes across the country, and even borrowing their clothing.[46]

These early collectives came out of the Depression-era culture in which AA was formed and of which only parts were carried over into the post-WWII era of the organization. AA's organizing principles embraced the ethos of egalitarian mutual aid that took root during the Depression. Though the notion of "self-improvement" or "self-help" was associated with individualist entrepreneurial success by the 1950s, like in Norman Vincent Peale's article on AA, it had a different valence in the 1930s. According to John Anson Ford, a New Dealer local official in Los Angeles, the idea that "people were to be 'helped to help themselves' was a radical departure from the traditional reliance on poor relief," in which public welfare and private charitable programs gave to petitioners based on whether they were deemed worthy of aid. In 1934, when the L.A. Board of Supervisors allocated funds to labor co-operatives—which built

[46] Alexander, "Alcoholics Anonymous," 22-23.

on the existing DIY network of co-ops, barter associations, and scrip exchanges that Angelenos had operated since 1931—Ford recalled how rich, conservative Angelenos were "alarmed" by what they saw as the advance of creeping socialism, while "liberals and radicals…hailed the proposal as a long advance to Utopia."[47] In this context, "self-help" tilted leftward in how it validated the autonomy of individual citizens while also reinforcing the necessity of a just, equitable collective. AA's understanding of self-help was the same. It posited that individuals had to be the ones to decide to change their lives, but that such a decision would only bear fruit if they acted within a collective dedicated to helping them along the way. In fact, a key thread of the AA movement was how it engaged in an ongoing, decentralized process of creating and sustaining alternative forms of economy and community within the broader society.[48] By the time that Peale wrote about the alcoholic leave "the AAs" behind as soon as he got sober and successful, the getting sober and rich and leaving "the AAs behind," the more nonconformist possibilities of AA were not part of its mainstream image, though they were still latent in the organization's culture.

In fact, postwar California officials started to look to AA chapters and AA-inspired recovery homes as supplements to the criminal justice and public health systems. In so doing, they hoped to emulate the organization's relative success with alcoholics (in contrast with psychiatric treatment and arrest) while discounting, or perhaps failing to understand, the foundational elements of its culture—voluntary participation and intimate, organically-created collectivities. By the late 1940s, individual California judges were sending alcohol-related offenders to AA in a

[47] John Anson Ford, *Thirty Explosive Years in Los Angeles County* (San Marino, California: The Huntington Library, 1961), 11.
[48] See Hyde, *The Gift,* and Lattin, *Distilled Spirits,* for two stellar works along these lines.

variety of forms.[49] Judges released alcoholic cases into the custody of a known AA member or made attendance at AA meetings a mandatory condition of probation.[50] The practice of requiring probationers to attend AA meetings became increasingly widespread, both in high-profile cases with Hollywood actors and those of ordinary people arrested on drunk driving charges.[51] Moreover, if certain judges had an alcoholic case on their docket, they would reach out to a recovery house manager to check on availability, and then inform defendants about the house instead of sentencing them to jail.[52] Joining the recovery home was recommended, not compulsory. When the homes made it onto DAR's radar in the late 1950s, they were hoping to transport recovery homes' "social milieu," which they thought was likely "the key agent in effecting rehabilitation," to state-run halfway houses and treatment programs. [53] Officials were most struck by the fact that the "environment of enforced sobriety" was "voluntarily accepted," with members choosing to "renounce some of his freedom of action" by obeying curfews, working around the house, and other obligations in exchange for joining the group's "sober fellowship."[54] DAR's report sought to isolate the features of the AA home in order to implement them elsewhere. This endeavor assumed that the "environment" was a transferable, replicable

[49] Just as postwar California officials were frustrated by the growing number of addict cases in jails and prisons, they were also upset by the high numbers of "drunk arrests" (a general term that referred to arrests for drunk driving, disorderly conduct, and vagrancy, among others) and the "revolving door" cycle of arrest, jail, release, and re-arrest. In 1955, drunk arrests accounted for forty-five percent of all arrests in Los Angeles County (and forty-nine percent statewide); two thirds of those arrests were "repeaters," or offenders who had been arrested more than once. They turned to AA as an alternative place to send alcoholics. MacCormick, Austin H. "Correctional Views on Alcohol, Alcoholism, and Crime," *Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (January 1963), 15-28; *Alcoholism and California, related statistics, 1900-1956*, Division of Alcoholic Rehabilitation, Department of Public Health, State of California, Berkeley, California, 1958, 80-81.

[50] An anonymous A.A. member wrote a piece for *Federal Probation,* a journal for law enforcement agents, about how this practice began in various courthouses of sympathetic judges across the nation. Anonymous, "I Think You Guys Mean It," *Federal Probation*, Issue 1 (January 1947), 8-11.

[51] "Tierney Paroled," June 19, 1947, Santa Cruz *Sentinel*, Vol. 92, No. 145, 4; R.K. Collins, "Unfortunately Police Court Business Booms," May 21, 1947, Santa Cruz *Sentinel*, Vol. 92, No. 120, 5; "Judge Miller Offers AA Instead of Jail," September 11, 1952, Mill Valley *Record,* Vol. LIII, No. 73, 5; "Krysiak Enters Guilty Plea to 'Disturbing Peace," June 15, 1958, Desert *Sun,* Vol. XXXI, No. 221, 1; all from UCR Digital Newspapers Collection.

[52] *Recovery establishments for alcoholics*, 18.

[53] *Recovery establishments for alcoholics,* 10.

[54] *Recovery establishments for alcoholics*, p. 10; 24.

modality that could be disconnected from the social world of AA instead of a phenomenon that was inextricable from it.

Some AA members pushed back against the state's incipient interference. The growing number of people getting involved in AA to fulfill their legal obligations rather than plant roots in the community was starting to become a problem for at least one chapter. In March 1950, Grayson Voss, a member of Venice Beach AA, told Judge Thurlow Taft that his chapter would no longer sign forms for probationers and parolees proving that they had attended A.A meetings.[55] Taft was an early proponent of the Los Angeles court system's "experiment," as he called it, with AA[56] At the time of Moss's complaint, Taft had been sending alcoholic cases to AA meetings as a mandatory condition of parole or deferred sentencing for two years. "All are welcome to the Venice meetings," Moss said, "but not by command performance, please." When Taft "expressed surprise" at Moss's challenge, Moss explained the logic behind his chapter's position, which he said was supported by AA's West Coast and national headquarters. First, they believed that "it does not work and is strictly against the voluntary AA tradition." Second, Taft's "practice of commanding people to participate removes all benefits of anonymity. Defendants' names were published in newspaper articles and government documents, exposing their identity to numerous outsiders.[57] Despite the Venice chapter's challenge, Taft continued to recommend defendants to AA meetings. A year after Moss's complaints, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Taft had recently congratulated twenty probationers on "successful participation in the Alcoholics

[55] "Not Command Affair: Alcoholics Anonymous 'Sentence' Challenged," March 5, 1950, Los Angeles *Times*, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, B1.
[56] "Liquor Blamed by Judge in 20 Probation Cases," December 18, 1951, Los Angeles *Times*, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 2.
[57] "Not Command Affair: Alcoholics Anonymous 'Sentence' Challenged," March 5, 1950, Los Angeles *Times*, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, B1.

Anonymous program."[58] The conflict between Taft and Venice Beach AA foreshadowed a core dilemma of mutual aid recovery groups, one which would befall Synanon a decade later: how to navigate the consequences of their success in a way that maintained the integrity and autonomy of the community which allowed for such success in the first place.

By the end of the 1950s, AA had firmly entered the national mainstream and had established comprehensive social worlds in cities like Los Angeles. The popular perception of the recovering alcoholic held that he would reassume his expected social roles as a result of his newfound sobriety. However, there were also other, more nonconformist threads of the movement that asserted themselves in different ways. The tradition of communal living continued, especially in Los Angeles, with the flourishing of recovery homes that blurred the line between temporary guesthouse and permanent commune. Some local groups also bucked the consequences of AA's acceptance by law enforcement, as evidenced in the Venice chapter's rejection of court-ordered participants.

The Trials of Expanding the Movement: Addict Spinoff Groups

The postwar emergence of addict mutual aid recovery stemmed directly from A.A, and would ultimately push the boundaries of AA's latent, piecemeal nonconformity. From the beginning, addicts' place in the movement was fraught. AA spawned many addict offshoots but did not accept them into their actual social world. Postwar Los Angeles AA cultivated the emergence of mixed addict-alcoholic and addict groups like nowhere else, but their troubled relationship to AA and law enforcement stunted the growth of a parallel social infrastructure to sustain them.

[58] "Liquor Blamed by Judge in 20 Probation Cases," December 18, 1951, Los Angeles Times, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 2.

The first AA-inspired groups arose within the institution through which so many illicit drug users and addicts cycled during that era: the Lexington prison-hospital in Kentucky. By 1944 at least, AA appeared in Lexington in the form of its key text, *Alcoholics Anonymous,* or the "Big Book." That year, a patient who was addicted to alcohol and morphine found the Big Book in the Lexington library and, upon his release, started an AA chapter in North Carolina. He also corresponded with the *AA Grapevine* about including narcotics addicts in the organization and suggested that an AA chapter be started in the Lexington facility.[59] Two years later, Houston S., an AA member from Kentucky reached out to Lexington's medical director about doing just that, having worked with AA members who struggled with alcoholism and drug addiction. In February 1947, Houston led the first meeting of the group that participating Lexington patients would call Addicts Anonymous. By 1950, it had over 200 members. The AA organization supported the group, sending it official literature (and recommending that they replace "alcohol" with "drugs") and, in some cases, helping members transition into life after institutionalization.[60]

However, there were limits to the support that AA would give to addict groups or even, to some extent addicts within its own community. Though many members raised the issue of "dual" addictions, the organization was ultimately committed to keeping the organization for alcoholics only. Sharing literature was fine; fully accepting addict members into AA was not. Bill Wilson explained this stance in both conceptual and practical terms. First, if the power of AA came from the connections built on shared experience, then the specificity of that experience mattered. An addict equating himself with an alcoholic "because alcohol is a narcotic," Wilson argued, was like a "homosexual [saying,] 'I've never had an alcoholic history but I do have a compulsion.

[59] This was part of a larger trend of AA members and chapters reaching out to jails and prisons. See White, et al, "Narcotics Anonymous: Its History and Culture," 3.
[60] White, et al, "Narcotics Anonymous," 4-6.

Alcoholics have a compulsion therefore I'm an alcoholic.'" Keeping the integrity of the model meant "forget[ting] the theory that alcoholics are narcotics and narcotics are alcoholics." Second, Wilson pointed to his personal experience of the social divide between addicts and alcoholics, which would make a mixed-community impossible. There was supposedly an "almost inexplainable distrust and dislike of alcoholics and addicts for each other," which Wilson thought was "absurd" but true nonetheless.[61] Of course, there was also a logical reason for AA members wanting to keep addicts at arm's length. Absorbing addicts into their community would mean taking on their stigma, which risked the group's still relatively newfound mainstream success.

The earliest AA-inspired addict groups were difficult to sustain outside of the institution, perhaps partially because they did not have AA's social infrastructure to aid them. Moreover, as Chapter One detailed, neither the general public nor law enforcement were quick to accept the gathering of addicts in free society. In 1949 in New York City, Danny C., a former Lexington patient, who had participated in its Addicts Anonymous program, started the first addict-specific group outside of the facility; its name was Narcotics Anonymous (NA). Immediately, NA struggled to find a consistent home for their meetings, as most places would not allow them access.[62] Historian William White argued that many outsiders believed "NA was just a ruse for addicts to meet to exchange drugs and connections," and had nothing to do with pursuing sobriety. For their part, addicts were afraid to expose themselves by openly attending a meeting. According to White, there was "fear among addicts that NA was infiltrated by police undercover agents and informers."[63] Even the supporters that NA did have, from sympathetic municipal

[61] White, et al, "Narcotics Anonymous," 12-13.
[62] The first meeting was in a carceral facility, the Women's House of Detention. Then, they were invited by a Salvation Army supporter to use their Hell's Kitchen cafeteria, but that shut down shortly thereafter. NA meetings were even held on the Staten Island Ferry at one point. White, et al, "Narcotics Anonymous," 6.
[63] White, et al, "Narcotics Anonymous," 7-8.

officials to charity workers, scared off potential members from joining, as they did not trust authorities to protect them from arrest.[64] The New York City NA group grew to ninety people by 1954, but never achieved a steady membership core. When Danny died in 1956, the group slowly dissolved, as it was not an "organized fellowship," but a group of people "lacking connection" with one another.[65]

Addict spin-offs from AA proliferated in postwar Los Angeles, though they faced the same trials that New York City's NA did. By the early 1950s, there were at least seven addict groups in the region, most of which were populated by members who had begun their recovery in AA[66] They went by a variety of names. Some emphasized their AA influence by calling themselves Narcotics Anonymous or Addicts Anonymous; there were multiple groups who used these names, not just one. Others were explicit about their focus on dual addictions, calling themselves Habit Forming Drugs or Hypes and Alcoholics. All groups faced significant harassment from law enforcement. Narcotics officers surveilled known meeting spots, waiting outside for them to end so they could question participants and search their bodies for needle marks—which, if found, was grounds for arrest, jail, or a hospital stay. According to one Los Angeles NA member, many addicts were "afraid to show up" to meetings because "they figure that an NA meeting is a good place to get picked up by the cops," having heard stories about attendees who got "a rough time" from officers. As in New York City, California law enforcement seemed to believe that the groups were fraudulent, and that the notion of addicts getting sober in free society was both inconceivable and dangerous. The pervasive postwar notion that addiction functioned like a contagious disease made AA-style mutual aid a risky

[64] Bob Stone, *My Years with Narcotics Anonymous* (Hulon Pendleton Publishing, 1997), 5-8.
[65] White, et al., "Narcotics Anonymous," 10.
[66] White, et al., "Narcotics Anonymous," 13; Stone, *My Years with Narcotics Anonymous,* 12-18.

endeavor when applied to addicts. What was different in Los Angeles was that addict groups somehow maintained the cohesion to counteract police repression. Many of them, from NA chapters to Hypes and Alcoholics, learned to "operate like an underground," changing the locations of their meetings every week to evade police.[67]

When Synanon emerged in the late 1950s, the fledging addict recovery scene in Los Angeles was marked by anxiety and isolation from a larger social world. To the extent that AA knew of the problems facing addict groups, it did not appear to have any sense that AA could or should do anything about them beyond allowing use of its model. Social separation between alcoholic and addict groups reigned supreme. While AA members settled into self-governed clubhouses and recovery homes, addicts seeking sobriety had no permanent place of refuge. Where judges were increasingly looking to AA as a substitute for criminal justice responses, law enforcement was actively trying to quash addict groups. Exposed to harassment and arrest, these groups had to spend a great deal of time and energy trying to make their meetings safe to attend, rather than focusing on expanding their numbers or building a sustainable, strong community.

"AA Cats" and "Dope Fiends": Recovery Countercultures and the Birth of Synanon in Postwar Los Angeles

Synanon was novel because it merged the addict recovery underground with the social infrastructure of mainstream AA To understand how these two streams converged, it is necessary to examine the people who occupied the space between the two separate worlds: Chuck Dederich and his circle of AA friends. Dederich's biography is important not because it tells the whole story of Synanon, but because it offers a look into grassroots recovery culture and counterculture

[67] Harry Nelson, "Dope Users Always Live With Fear," July 8, 1958, *Los Angeles Times,* ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times, 2.

in postwar Los Angeles. Getting sober in AA did not push Dederich towards normative middle-class respectability, but to reject the corporate "rat race" once and for all. Dederich was a Midwestern salesman who "revolted," to use Barbara Ehrenreich's framework, against the "male breadwinner ethic" of the mid-twentieth-century United States to become a "beach bum" in 1940s Los Angeles. [68] By the 1950s, when he entered the communal world of Los Angeles AA, he gravitated towards men and women who, like him, were devoted to the organization but wanted to push it in more experimental directions. Dederich's encounters with the alternative AA community and his own tortured path in and out of nonconformity created the conditions for Synanon to emerge, culminating in the organic formation of the first addict-alcoholic clubhouse and commune.

Charles E. Dederich: Midwestern Corporation Man to Los Angeles "Beach Bum" and AA Devotee



Figure 5: Charles E. Dederich in Synanon, undated.

[68] Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1983).

Dederich came from an upper-class, conservative, Midwestern background, whose values he bucked at a relatively young age. Dederich was born in 1913 in Toledo, Ohio. He grew up in a predominantly white world, never interacting socially with anyone Black. His mother raised him to be a strict Roman Catholic, and he "took it very seriously." "A lot of the kids would stay out, play marbles, smoke, or whatever kids do [on Sundays]," Dederich recalled, "but I would always go to church because I believed, literally, that I would go to hell if I didn't go."[69] When he was four years old, his father died in a car accident, which was potentially alcohol-related. By twelve, his mother had remarried a wealthy German construction engineer whose politics were "way to the right of the Republican Party." Dederich's years of "rebellion" started around that time. After reading H.G. Wells' *The Outline of History*, he became a "militant atheist" and made that fact known to his family and his Catholic high school, "deliberately making [himself] a misfit." He also felt "impelled to take the opposite view of everything that [his stepfather] stood for" politically. Around 1931, he started at the University of Notre Dame, where he "got all mixed up in the parlor pitch" of the Communist movement.[70] He was not a committed party member, but he was inspired by its ideas and the people whom he hung around. "Goddamn, they lived intensely," he recalled. "In the early thirties, there was no more exciting ride than a fellow traveler, a parlor pink… They were going to save the world."[71] Dederich read books about alternative social and economic structures. He was exposed to the concept of cooperatives for the first time after reading *Sweden: The Middle Way,* a book on the nation's democratic socialism experiment; it made a lasting impression on him.[72]

[69] Chuck Dederich, *Seven Voices of Synanon*, 4.
[70] Chuck Dederich, *Seven Voices of Synanon,* 5.
[71] "Transcript: 710714 Horrible Hebes – Brainstrust Development Mtg w/ Spec. Reps," Box 238, UCLA Synanon.
[72] "Transcript: 720906 CED/Jean Debelle – Belgium," Box 239, UCLA Synanon.

Dederich's personal failure to launch as a young adult led him back into the fold of his family, where he began to cater his life to the expectations of the world in which he had been born. As a "straight A student" in high school, Dederich thought he would coast through college without studying or even buying books. By the beginning of his sophomore year, "the whole thing caught up with [him]."[73] After flunking three classes, he dropped out of the University of Notre Dame and returned home to Toledo, where he briefly enrolled in Toledo University only to quit after one semester. In 1933, the "pit of the Depression," Dederich was a two-time college drop-out, but he did not have trouble finding work given his family connections. He got a job at Libbey-Owens-Ford, an automotive glass company, after the managers realized he was "Agnes's boy."[74] In 1934, he "wound up with another 'Agnes's boy' job" in the accounting department of the Gulf Oil Refining Company. Within twelve months, he was promoted to sales "by dint of knowing the right people." For the next nine years or so, Dederich was a merchandising representative for Gulf Oil, where he had it "real easy." Along with four other men in his department, Dederich would "gallop around the countryside with very liberal expense accounts. We called ourselves the 'have one on us boys.'" Heavy drinking was "good for business," and Dederich was becoming a "real good two-fisted drinker." On weeknights, he would "go down to the speakeasy and get looped" with colleagues and clients, and then "drank always on the weekends to excess."[75] By the early 1940s, Dederich was the white-collar breadwinner par excellence, with a wife, Chilnessa; a son, Charles Dederich, Jr.; a big house, and a cushy job at a corporation where he was well-placed to climb the ladder.

[73] Chuck Dederich, *Seven Voices of Synanon*, 6.
[74] Chuck Dederich, *Seven Voices of Synanon*, 7.
[75] Chuck Dederich, *Seven Voices of Synanon*, 8.

A near-fatal illness would change the course of Dederich's life, spurring his "revolt" against the normative roles of employee, provider, father, and husband. Circa 1943, during surgery to address intense ear pain, Dederich was diagnosed with spinal meningitis, a deadly condition infecting the fluid and membranes around the brain and spinal cord. While unconscious he was transferred to a special clinic at the University of Michigan where he received experimental shots of penicillin that saved his life. The surgeries left him scarred. His right eye was "crossed all over the place" with stiches, and he had a gaping quarter-sized hole near his ear on the right side of his head. A severed facial nerve paralyzed the entire right half of his face, causing it to droop down, which it would continue to do for the rest of his life. During his seven weeks in the hospital, Dederich felt like "some kind of freak," with clinicians "always coming up, bundling me into a wheel chair, and taking me down to put me on a stage inside of a lecture room with a group of doctors. They'd use a pointer and show how this had happened to this man, because I had a fatal bunch of symptoms," but had survived.[76] He was released into a different set of circumstances than before. The family had spent so much money on his treatment that they had to move to a smaller house with Dederich's mother and stepfather. He still had his job at Gulf Oil, but it was the height of World War II and gas was being tightly rationed for civilians; there was no more company car or large expense account for traveling sales calls. Meanwhile, Dederich could not stop thinking about the impression he "had picked up from the hospital…that [he] wasn't going to last very long." The surgeries had put a severe strain on his heart; he felt like he had six months to live, maybe. Within months of leaving the hospital, he

[76] Chuck Dederich, *Seven Voices of Synanon*, 10; 13.

quit Gulf Oil and "decided to come to California."[77] If he was close to death, he would rather "die where there was warm sunshine."[78]

Though Dederich left Ohio in a frenzy of existential anxiety, ready to die as peacefully as possible, he found in Los Angeles a vision of a new way of living. Initially, he had planned to forfeit all his obligations—job, wife, son, parents—though he was terrified by the thought. While driving across the country in a pick-up truck, Dederich turned around when he hit Las Vegas, drove east to Kansas City, then turned around again, back to California.[79] When he arrived in Los Angeles, he ended up at Muscle Beach in Santa Monica, where glistening acrobats hurled themselves toward thick metal rings and the sun reflected off the Pacific Ocean. Dederich realized that he had gotten one massive part of his plan wrong—he did not want to be alone at all. Shortly after arriving, he called his wife, who agreed to move there with their son. They found a trailer, "an old piece of junk that couldn't even be moved," near the coast, and lived alongside other wartime migrants.[80] Dederich was intrigued by the scene around Muscle Beach in the early 1940s, which was an eclectic mix of athletes and entertainers, as well as a proto-hippie movement called the Nature Boys, whose members grew their hair long, sung the praises of a raw vegetarian diet, and joked around with passers-by.[81] Once a Midwest corporation man,

---

[77] Chuck Dederich, *Seven Voices of Synanon*, 13.
[78] Casriel, *So Fair a House*, 17.
[79] Endore, *Synanon*, 124-125.
[80] Chuck Dederich, *Seven Voices of Synanon*, 14.
[81] Before the peak of its mainstream popularity in the 1950s, Muscle Beach of the 1940s was a mixture of circus and athletic competition that had sprung up around a Works Progress Administration project in the mid-1930s, after an earthquake destroyed Santa Monica's school campuses. When out-of-work acrobats and vaudeville performers flocked to the site in the late 1930s, it quickly received the moniker "Muscle Beach," building off the place's earlier nickname of Mussel Beach for the mussels that clung to the SM pier. The war suppressed much of Muscle Beach's activity, but the place sprung back to life in the postwar years, especially when newcomers from the East brought along their weightlifting culture, which was seen as quite dangerous and part of a riskier lifestyle. During the mid-late 1940s, the beach was also frequented by a group called the "Nature Boys," long-haired men who promoted healthy eating and natural living to the crowds that would gather to watch the spectacle. It seems that Dederich was a part of this scene, as well as the physical culture scene in Muscle Beach in the 1940s.

Dederich became a "real Muscle Beach nut," with hair down to his shoulders and a "big, bushy mustache." In keeping with a long line of California health seekers, he stopped drinking, smoking, and eating meat, and started to lift weights and play beach volleyball. Dederich and Chilnessa provided for their family without having to work very hard. She "picked up an occasional job" while he helped people move, caddied at a local golf course, and sometimes worked a gig "stabbing paper on the beach" for six dollars a day. "We were very happy," Dederich recalled. "We managed to live, and it was a lot of fun."[82] It was Dederich's first effort to forge a new type of family and work life, one that prioritized leisure and pleasure instead of accumulation and security.

Dederich's nonconformist life would come into conflict with the pull of his upbringing. He, Chilnessa, and Chuck Jr., were enjoying their "beach bum, philosophical style" way of living for a few years before Dederich's mother came out to visit them. She was "tickled to death" by the "casual, quasi-bohemian beach business," but the experience had "a queer effect" on Dederich. Was he, "the great Chuck Dederich," a man whose lifestyle should be something to make his mother laugh and gawk, even if it was with some type of delight?[83] Here he was, "living on the beach in a trailer," when he had been "raised in a culture where we didn't even know anybody who lived in an apartment. The only people who lived in apartments were divorcees and prostitutes and gangsters," basically, people who had "something wrong with them."[84] When she left, Dederich found himself desperate for a steady corporate job. He started to "tear around to all the oil companies," but as he was sporting a huge mustache, a spotty work record and a bad bill of health, nobody would give him one. "I had no economic worries as a

[82] Chuck Dederich, *Seven Voices of Synanon*, 15.
[83] Chuck Dederich, *Seven Voices of Synanon*, 15.
[84] Chuck Dederich, *Seven Voices of Synanon*, 15; "Transcript: 651026 – SFVSC #3 Ten questions," Box 229, UCLA Synanon.

beach bum," Dederich recalled, but "all of a sudden, I was worried sick."[85] Choosing to be a beach bum had been freeing; the idea that he was no longer fit for the white-collar world was terrifying. He started drinking again. He also got involved in "one crazy deal after another," trying to come up with a respectable career path: a cockamamie plan to start producing movies with some guys he met on the beach, a couple of self-run businesses distributing weed-killing machines and re-usable paper cleaning cloths, and an income tax consulting service. In 1947, he left Chilnessa and Chuck Jr. for a co-worker.[86] The new couple had a "God-awful time" almost immediately, but they were expecting a daughter, so they stuck it out. By the early 1950s, Dederich landed a job at Douglas Aircraft, one of the main defense contractors in Los Angeles. He was also "getting drunker and drunker all the time." [87] After more than a decade away from Toledo, Dederich found himself in a sad imitation of where he had started: an unsatisfying corporate job, a family to provide for, and a heavy drinking habit. Yet this time, he was immediately aware of how much he did not want such a life.

Dederich found AA in the midst of extreme isolation and depression. His marriage was crumbling, his mother had died, and he had alienated his friends. In May of 1956, the situation was so bad that his second wife, Ruth, "finally told [him] to get lost," took their daughter and filed for divorce.[88] Dederich went on a days-long bender, to the point that "every blood vessel in [his] eyeballs [was] hemorrhaging" and he would wake up shaking from delirium tremens. He found some AA literature in the house that Ruth had picked up at one point and called the 24-hour hotline. Within hours, an AA member arrived at his house and stayed there for "four days of

[85] Chuck Dederich, *Seven Voices of Synanon*, 16.
[86] Divorce filing of Charles E. Dederich and Chilnessa I. Dederich, No. SMD5851, Los Angeles County Superior Court, Hall of Records (LASC).
[87] Chuck Dederich, *Seven Voices of Synanon*, 17.
[88] Chuck Dederich, Seven Voices, 18; Divorce filing of Charles E. Dederich and Ruth Dederich, No. SMD503724, LASC.

horror" as Dederich withdrew from alcohol. On the fifth day, the man took him to a meeting nearby. At first, Dederich stayed quiet, standing near the back of the room "close to the john," with a glass of water in his "trembling hands." After listening to people talk for a while, he joined the conversation, sharing his story and making them laugh in the process. "Afterwards," he recalled, "people swarmed up to me, congratulating me, slapping me on the back, and saying I was great." In that room, filled with other alcoholics, Dederich was a success—not because of how impressive his life was, but because he had been honest about how much it was not. Dederich felt like the "long period of silence" in his life was coming to an end.[89]

At this point, Dederich's life could have gone the direction of the classic postwar AA success story—from rock bottom to reclaimed family man and employee—but that was not the path he took. He wanted to get sober, but he did not want to return to the life he had lived before. Instead, he threw himself into the communal world of Los Angeles AA, which would ultimately lead him to the Beat scene in Venice Beach-Ocean Park. After his first meeting, Dederich "became a frantic, fanatical AA fellow."[90] He worked enough to get by and otherwise "spent every moment…with the AA movement," attending meetings every day and twice on Saturdays and Sundays. Often he would drive across the city for a meeting, arrive hours early, and just sit and wait for it to start. His zeal was "welcome" at first, but grew troublesome. He "hogged" every meeting. "I was the first one to speak," Dederich admitted, "and I'd speak all night unless they stopped me." Eventually, the various Angeleno AA groups put a temporary ban on him talking at all during meetings. Instead, they encouraged him to get involved in other ways. Dederich was a great speaker, so he was called upon to give "lectures on AA and alcoholism" for

[89] Endore, *Synanon,* 179-180.
[90] Endore, *Synanon*, 179-180.

civic clubs and other outside organizations.[91] He also started to shift his focus to Twelfth Step work, helping other alcoholics on a more intimate level. He practically "lived in AA clubs" so that he could man the 24-hour hotline and respond to every call he could.[92] By 1957, just six months after he joined the group, Dederich's membership in AA constituted the entire framework in which he lived.

Drawing strength from the AA community, Dederich was able to reject the inward and outward pressure to conform to a conventional middle-class life. In January of 1957, Dederich moved to Santa Barbara after getting a job as a pattern-maker, his first steady employment in years. The town had a strong AA culture; Dederich rented a room across the street from one of its two AA clubhouses. Still, Dederich was feeling adrift. He was haunted by the feeling that he was "a common drunk who had failed in business, failed as a husband, failed as a father, failed in every department in life."[93] His dueling desires were, and would continue to be, the great struggle of Dederich's life—the drive to achieve mainstream success versus the yearning to be free from that goal entirely and to explore what the good life could be if it were not defined by normative values. By June, Dederich was feeling so low that he suffered what appears to have been a week-long agoraphobic episode. For seven days, he stayed in the clubhouse's library from nine in the morning to eleven at night, afraid to leave the premises except for crossing the street to sleep. His fellow AA members brought him meals as he read obsessively. At one point, Dederich came across an old copy of Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance" that his stepfather had given him decades earlier. The words and the moment coalesced into epiphany. As he read

[91] Casriel, *So Fair a House*, 18.
[92] Chuck Dederich, *Seven Voices* of Synanon, 19.
[93] Endore, *Synanon,* 109.

and re-read the pages, he started to approach the text as "a book of directions," as "technical for the human psyche as a mechanic's manual was for the repair and running of the car":

> What the book said was, you—you the reader—you have a piece of God in you. Why, then, don't you rely on your own thinking and your own impulses? Trust yourself, man! Be a convert to your own inborn religion.

One can imagine the impact of that realization on Dederich, who had struggled for so long to cast off the burden of middle-class respectability. What he wanted to do, deep in his bones, was devote himself to AA work, whatever financial precarity or general insecurity that might bring. "When I realized that I wanted to spend the rest of my life rescuing drunks," Dederich recalled, "my terror left me" and "I no longer felt that I needed a job to earn a living."[94] The next day, he quit his job, even though he "was aware of the fact" that he was probably "unemployable" going forward.[95] With two hundred dollars and an Oldsmobile to his name, he drove back to Los Angeles to pursue his "own inborn religion" of mutual aid recovery.

Back in Los Angeles, Dederich would return to a "beach bum" life—this time, within the fold of AA's communal world, supported by like-minded peers and a sense that he was pursuing his calling. He rented a "fleabag of a room" near the Santa Monica coast and bought a direct phone line for his local clubhouse. Every day, Dederich went to the club and "took every incoming call, doing for other people what my sponsor had done for me, wiping away their tears, talking AA philosophy to them, [and] cleaning up their vomit."[96] He also moved callers into his apartment, an informal recovery house which quickly drained his finances. By July 1957, Dederich was broke and his car had been repossessed. He moved into a Twelfth Step House in the area, perhaps one of the establishments that would appear in DAR's report several years later.

---

[94] Endore, *Synanon,* 181; 183.
[95] Charles Dederich, *Seven Voices* of Synanon, 21.
[96] Endore, *Synanon,* 183.

Around this time, Dederich met Gray Thompson at an AA meeting, and the two men kicked off something of a bromance. Thompson watched as Dederich "had the whole audience rocking and laughing," including himself. "It was love at first sight," Thompson remembered. "This guy was the double bubble. He was dynamite. He just knocked my lights out."[97] In turn, Dederich was captivated by Thompson, a six-foot-four, bronzed, handsome veteran of World War II with a wild sense of humor and adventure. Dederich was "getting over a bad case of shattered image" at that point in his life, "and now came this wonderful figure of a man to give a blood transfusion to [his] wounded psyche."[98] The pair became practically inseparable. They went to AA meetings, swam in the Pacific, picked up women, and debated each other until the crack of dawn. More than anything, they were connected by their devotion to AA Later that summer, when Dederich's friends from Santa Barbara AA sent him funds to restart his recovery house, Dederich and Thompson embarked on the project together and started moving alcoholics into their apartments. It lasted for just a few weeks before they ran out of money, but that did not quash their enthusiasm.

AA Recovery, Beat Style: Dederich's Spinoff Group in Venice Beach-Ocean Park

Dederich and Thompson's all-encompassing participation in AA led them to a more experimental recovery subculture emanating from the Beat scene in 1950s Venice-OP. As the summer of 1957 ended, Dederich moved in a woman from AA who housed recovering alcoholics at her place in Ocean Park. She introduced Dederich to "a circle of people with whom [he] had had no contact up to that point: the beatnik crowd."[99] The area was an ideal setting for Dederich's desire to explore alternative ways of living. By the 1950s, the Venice-OP beachfront

[97] "Gray Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon.
[98] Endore, Synanon, 109.
[99] Casriel, *So Fair a House,* 21.

was culturally vibrant yet in a state of structural disarray from decades of municipal neglect and haphazardly regulated oil drilling. Some locals referred to the area as the "slum by the sea," as it was full of empty storefronts, industrial debris, rundown beach cottages, and vice operations. [100] What made the area undesirable for some was exactly what attracted others to it. It had relative freedom from police surveillance and harassment, as well as low rents and plenty of vacant spaces, full of possibility. According to historian Sarah Schrank, the low cost, free-wheeling beach culture of postwar Venice-OP beckoned to "every alternative lifestyle follower, including artists, writers, musicians, student dropouts, dope smokers, Zen masters, vegetarians, lesbians, and gay men."[101] There are strong indicators that the area also cultivated a nonconformist recovery scene in the postwar years, one where Dederich's Beat AA friends felt welcome. It was the Venice AA chapter that challenged court-mandated meeting attendance in the early 1950s. Venice-OP was also where the mixed-addiction AA spin-off group Hypes and Alcoholics started. As "hype" was a slang term (and potentially derogatory tone at that, depending on who was using it) for heroin addict, its titular usage spoke to a certain mischievousness and lack of pretension among the group members. Furthermore, their overt inclusion of heroin addicts was in itself a subversive act.

Once he joined the Beat-inspired subculture of AA in Venice-OP, Dederich got involved in more experimental forms of sobriety-seeking. Shortly after moving into the A.A> woman's home, Dederich participated in clinical LSD alcoholism trials along with at least five others in his new crowd of friends, including Thompson, though mainstream AA members considered this

[100] Lawrence Lipton, *The Holy Barbarians,* 15. For more on the state of the Venice-OP beachfront in this era, see Sarah S. Elkind, Chapter 1,"Oil and Water: The Public and the Private on Southern California Beaches, 1920–1950," in *How Local Politics Shape Federal Policy*: *Business, Power, & the Environment in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles.* Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011.
[101] Schrank, *Art and the City*, 107.

activity controversial at best—and a total betrayal of the group's principles, at worst.[102] Beginning in 1956, California's DAR funded the Alcoholism Research Center (ARC) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) to study the disease and future avenues for medical treatment, one of which was dosing alcoholics with LSD.[103] In the mid-1950s, LSD was one of many pharmacological innovations that clinicians hoped was the answer to intractable mental illness; some of the earliest trials dosed asylum patients with the drug.[104] The trials were extended to alcoholics in North America on the basis that LSD's psychoactive properties seemed to "[offer] a chemically induced experience that often generated a sense of spirituality," even something akin to "the state of religious conversion," which might propel their shift towards sobriety.[105] As AA's emphasis on surrendering to a Higher Power seemed to overlap with the effects of LSD, ARC researchers recruited trial subjects at AA meetings, as well in Skid Row.[106] Even Bill Wilson was intrigued by the drug, which he had heard about from his friends, authors Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard, and actually took LSD at UCLA's ARC in 1956.[107] Journalist Don Lattin has argued that Wilson understood how controversial this action would be, and that he only felt comfortable participating because he had stepped down as the organization's leader a year earlier.[108] Still, shocked whispers about Wilson's involvement with the ARC spread

---

[102] Casriel, *So Fair a House*, 20.
[103] "Alcoholic Rehabilitation: Treatment, Research, Education, 1954-1959," Division of Alcoholic Rehabilitation, Department of Public Health, State of California, Berkeley, 1959. For more on LSD alcoholism trials in the late 1950s, see Steven J. Novak, "LSD before Leary: Sidney Cohen's Critique of 1950s Psychedelic Drug Research," *Isis,* Vol. 88, No. 1 (March 1997), 87-110; Erika Dyck, 'Hitting Highs at Rock Bottom': LSD Treatment for Alcoholism, 1950-1970," *Social History of Medicine,* Vol. 19, No. 2 (August 2006), 313-329.
[104] Novak, "LSD Before Leary," 91.
[105] Dyck, "'Hitting Highs at Rock Bottom,'" 320-321.
[106] "Gray Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon.
[107] Wilson had past experiences that likely informed his openness to the drug. He had a psychedelic-type experience in New York City's Towns Hospital, which treated alcoholics with a detoxification mixture of the hallucinogenic belladonna plant. It triggered a spiritual epiphany in him, and set him on the course to sobriety and founding A.A. Wilson would correspond with Huxley and Heard throughout his life, and even had them contribute to the *AA Grapevine.* He also stayed in Heard's monastic commune, Trabuco College, multiple times. Lattin, *Distilled Spirits.* For Wilson's specific LSD date, see Novak, "LSD Before Leary," 97.
[108] Lattin, *Distilled Spirits,* 195.

throughout Los Angeles AA[109] According to Thompson, the tiny minority of AA members who participated in ARC's trials were into "pretty way out stuff"—people like Dederich and himself who were open to forgoing AA's rule of abstinence in the name of "searching."[110]

Dederich's LSD session was hugely transformative for him, and intensified his desire to pursue a more questioning, authentic approach to life. In August 1957, Dederich received a dosage of LSD at the ARC's off-site location in downtown Los Angeles.[111] According to the primary researchers, the trials separated subjects into groups of three to five and placed them in "a protective, supportive, and permissive environment, where they had the opportunity to experience music and art, and in some cases, had a chance to sit quietly in the dark, walk in a garden, etc."[112] During his nine-hour trip, Dederich did not experience "sensory enhancements or hallucinations," but a profound sense of peace and curiosity about the world.[113] One participant, every thirty minutes, "would get up and with great deliberation sweep all around the whole periphery of the room," while another watched him and said, "Some will sweep," which seemed to Dederich like a great truth. When one man "took his shirt off and got himself into the fetal position" and started making gibberish sounds, it "didn't bother us at all," Dederich recalled. He and the other participants looked over at him, "very friendly," and "just accepted it."[114] The post-

---

[109] Lattin, *Distilled Spirits,* 198.

[110] "Gray Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon. By 1959, just over one hundred alcoholics had participated in the ARC trials, which was not all that many given how large the city's AA community was. Overall, AA participation in the trials was likely really small. "Alcoholic Rehabilitation: Treatment, Research, Education, 1954-1959," Division of Alcoholic Rehabilitation, Department of Public Health, State of California, Berkeley, 1959, A-9.

[111] The ARC's LSD trials were the only studies not conducted on the UCLA campus; they were held at the Men's Service Club of the Volunteers of America instead. "Alcoholic Rehabilitation: Treatment, Research, Education, 1954-1959," Division of Alcoholic Rehabilitation, Department of Public Health, State of California, Berkeley, 1959, A-9.

[112] Keith S. Ditman, M.D. and John R. B. Whittlesey, M.S., "Comparison of the LSD-25 Experience and Delirium Tremens," *American Medical Association Archives of General Psychiatry* 1(1), 1959, 48.

[113] Casriel, *So Fair a House*, 20.

[114] When Dederich recounted this experience in 1965, he contrasted his and the other subjects' reactions to the man speaking gibberish with that of "the psychs," who "were over there with the microphones writing like mad and trying to get his gibberings on tape." It was one of Dederich's early experiences with how psychiatrists seemed to

trip experience was even more significant for Dederich, who felt a tremendous upheaval of emotions." For years, he "could never cry," even during his illness and divorces. He had felt an "emptiness" and "a grueling, grinding boredom" that he tried to escape, often by drinking. However, immediately after the LSD trial, Dederich "cried uncontrollably for several days."[115] For two months afterwards, he still went into his room sometimes in the middle of the day to cry. He was also overwhelmed by a sense of awe at existence. "Consciousness was exquisitely painful and exquisitely the opposite—comically pleasurable and enjoyable," he explained. "Life was very good and also very bad. Good was so good you couldn't stand it. And bad was so bad you couldn't stand it."[116] Somehow, it felt like "the paradox was resolved" in his mind. He had "a glimpse of that area that somehow seems beyond contrast," where he did not feel isolated and adrift but full of "a feeling that has some bond or connection with the many, many beings" in the world.[117] The experience "changed [his] whole life."[118]

After the LSD session, Dederich started on an exploratory course of self-education that was influenced by the Venice-OP Beat scene and the people he had met at the ARC. The woman who opened her house to Dederich showed him how to apply for unemployment, which allowed him to move out of her informal recovery house into a small room by the beach. To make the most of his newfound financial breathing room, Dederich "settled down for six months of reading, cooking, and caring for [himself]."[119] His experiences at the ARC gave him a specific

---

miss the forest for the trees, or whose effort to find measurable data blinded them to other, more mysterious or existential aspects. "Transcript: 651124 – SFVSC Lecture #7 "Flight Fight or Put Your Head In The Sand," Box 230, UCLA Synanon.

[115] Casriel, *So Fair a House*, 20.

[116] Yablonsky, *The Hippie Trip* (New York: Pegasus, 1968), 281.

[117] "Transcript: 651124 – SFVSC Lecture #7 "Flight Fight or Put Your Head In The Sand," Box 230, UCLA Synanon.

[118] Casriel, *So Fair a House*, 20.

[119] Casriel, *So Fair a House*, 21.

place to start.[120] In order to keep trial subjects' experiences as pure as possible, ARC researchers had asked them not to read *The Doors of Perception,* Aldous Huxley's popular 1954 book on his encounters with the psychoactive drug mescaline. Dederich obliged, but then read it immediately afterwards, "plus many more on the subject" of psychedelics and consciousness.[121] He also became interested in Zen Buddhism from "a young man who worked for UCLA… [and who had] talked about Zen while we were under the influence." After the experiment, Dederich "dug around and got one of Alan Watts's books," *The Way of Zen*, as well as Zen texts by D.T. Suzuki.[122] (Watts also took LSD at the ARC in the late 1950s.)[123] Dederich read widely about religion and spirituality; fragments of Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* and St. Francis of Assisi's prayer for peace would appear in the earliest Synanon texts.[124] He was especially captivated by psychology and sociology, reading books like David Riesman's 1950 *The Lonely Crowd*, Clark Moustakas's 1956 edited collection on humanist psychology, *The Self: Explorations in Personal Growth,* and books on Gestalt therapy.[125]

---

[120] The ARC's chief researchers, Dr. Keith Ditman and Dr. Sidney Cohen, would actually become friends and colleagues of Dederich's after the experiment. They kept tabs on him as Synanon grew; in an article that Ditman co-authored, they referred to one of their ARC subjects becoming "a prophet of sorts," which is probably a reference to Dederich. Decades later, in 1978, a Synanon member working on an internal history of the group referred to "an article" that Ditman wrote in which he "described Chuck as a minor prophet of sorts." For the Ditman article, see: Keith S. Ditman, M.D., et al, "Nature and Frequency of Claims Following LSD," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease,* Vol. 134, No. 4 (April 1962), 350. For the Synanon document, see "Gray Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon.

[121] Yablonsky, *The Hippie Trip*, 275.

[122] "Transcript: 680000B CED on Hippies with Yablonsky and Endore," Box 231, UCLA Synanon; "The Self and Not-Self," Box 224, UCLA Synanon.

[123] Novak, "LSD Before Leary" 97.

[124] Synanon's early letterhead had on it an excerpt from the Tao Te Ching, "…enabling man to go right, disabling him to go wrong." The Prayer of St. Francis influenced parts of the Synanon Prayer, according to "CED: *Synanon v. IRS*," Box 531, UCLA Synanon.

[125] Riesman's concepts of "inner-directed" and "outer-directed" individuals appear in early Dederich writings, like 'Synanon Foundation: a paper," October 1958, Box 224, UCLA Synanon. Humanist psychologist Moustakas's work also influenced the Synanon prayer, and may have been the first place that Dederich encountered the works of Abraham Maslow, on which he would base a months-long seminar series in 1965. See, "Letter from Chuck Dederich to Judge Evans," May 1959, Box 232, UCLA Synanon. For the influence of Gestalt on Dederich, see ""Gray Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon.

During this period, Dederich and his circle of friends in Venice-OP started to experiment with the forms of AA, creating an informal spin-off group interested in talking about new ideas and taboo subjects in the process. Dederich was still regularly attending AA meetings, but found himself increasingly "bothered by the [Christian] religious overtones of the meeting and the lack of utilization of thoughts" from traditions like Eastern spirituality and disciplines like "anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and sociology."[126] By January 1958, Dederich, Thompson, and about fourteen other AA members, including seven men and six women, were hosting meeting after-parties at their places, complete with coffee and snacks.[127] Dederich was the intellectual leader of the group. He kicked off the sessions by introducing a new concept from a book he had read—like how to "pursue a line of inquiry of no line"—for the group to consider and explore.[128] But the others made their mark, too. One woman, Adaline Ainlay, had done "analytic couch work," so she introduced the gang to the psychoanalytic language and ideas that quickly dominated their discourse. Thompson's free-spirited crassness gave the sessions their "loud, dirty, and wild" tone. [129] He wanted the group to curse and talk about sex freely. Where Dederich had "his nose in his goddamn books," Thompson recalled, "All I did [was]… go over there [and] see who had the balls to say that they sucked pussy or who said they didn't," or if any woman would "cop out that she played with herself, which, in those days, women would never cop to that."[130] Thompson's vulgarity and thrill for conflict had an important side effect. According to Dederich, Thompson would "needle" people until they could not help "emptying out the vials" of their "hostilities." Soon, the other members joined in, delighting in "let[ting] the

[126] Casriel, *So Fair a House*, 21.
[127] Yablonsky, *Synanon: The Tunnel Back*, 50.
[128] "CED Edited Works: Ten Years Sober," Box 207, UCLA Synanon/
[129] Yablonsky, *Synanon: The Tunnel Back*, 49.
[130] "Gray Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon.

air out of pompously inflated egos."[131] Emotional catharsis often emerged as a result, which seemed to mimic the experience of taking LSD.[132] Dederich noticed that the more they moved away from "polite conversations" and towards something rawer and more unpredictable, "people seemed to grow before [his] eyes."[133] Within a month or so, the group was getting together three nights a week on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays. The sessions also assumed a name of their own: "synanons," a nonsense word that Thompson had come up with one day while trying to describe them.[134]

The spirit of these synanons were likely influenced by the group's participation in the Beat subculture of Venice-OP, which emphasized the necessity of free-flowing communication in the pursuit of a more honest, genuine life. Improvisation, spontaneity, and breaking the mold of conventional forms of expression were key features of the era more broadly, too, from bebop jazz to spoken word performance and poetry. In *On the Road,* Jack Kerouac's 1957 loosely fictionalized memoir and one of the earliest Beat texts, Kerouac described sessions between Allen Ginsberg ("Carlo Marx") and Neal Cassady ("Dean Moriarty") that recall those of Dederich's offshoot AA group. Late at night, the two men, and sometimes Kerouac, would sit facing each other and start "with an abstract thought," which they "discussed" until something "reminded each other of another abstract point" to explore. The structure, or lack thereof, was

---

[131] Yablonsky, *Synanon: The Tunnel Back*, 49.

[132] Dederich compared the small-s synanon to LSD in "Log: L620403: Personal Counseling, CED Speaks on Self and Non-Self," Box 224, UCLA Synanon. It may have been that Dederich was trying to get the epiphanic effect of LSD without the risks of taking a drug. By the spring of 1958, Dederich was a little wary of LSD. He did another session, but did not have any major insights. He also saw AA friends, like Thompson, go back for repeated sessions and then relapse. One died of alcoholism shortly thereafter. He still valued his first experience immensely, but he thought it was a volatile thing; not everyone, in every state of mind, was ready to do it.

[133] Yablonsky, *Synanon: The Tunnel Back*, 49.

[134] According to Dederich, Thompson loved to mix and make up words for dramatic effect. For example, "he would say 'solicitate' instead of 'solicit,' and he would call the coffee urn the 'coffee urinal." The word "synanon" was Thompson's combination of "seminar," "symposium," "synagogue," and probably a few other words, as well. The name stuck, and the group started to use it regularly. See: Endore, *Synanon*, 111 for the "coffee urinal" quote and "CED Edited Works: Ten Years Sober," Box 207, UCLA Synanon, for the "synagogue" quote.

akin to Dederich's suggestion that his friends "pursue a line of inquiry with no line." Kerouac's group also demanded total transparency from each other and often reacted to evasions with harshness. In the middle of one session, "Carlo asked Dean if he was honest and specifically if he was being honest with him in the bottom of his soul." When Kerouac questioned whether such honesty was possible, Ginsberg told him he was "talking absolute bullshit and Wolfean romantic posh!" The sessions usually ended at dawn, when the men grew tired and felt closer to one another—or when, as Cassady once said, they would simply "stop talking" and "understand purely."[135]

The quest for honesty that did not mince words or shy away from taboos was also a part of the Beat critique of postwar culture. Historian Morris Dickstein described life in the 1950s (white) United States as a "frozen smile," marked by an "anxiety" that was "metaphysical and hermetic, closed in upon itself," aware of yet overwhelmed by the tremors of past violence and the rumblings of social upheaval to come. [136] In Norman Mailer 1957 essay on Beat, or "Hip," culture, he argued that the hipster—or the "White Negro,"[137] to use his titular term—was driven to "set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self" as a way to escape the only options with which his society seemed to provide him: "instant death by atomic war" or "slow death by conformity." For Mailer, the "essence of Hip" was to risk being brutal

[135] Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Viking Press, 1957), 30-31.
[136] Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977).
[137] A note on the racism underlying Mailer's essay, which gave his explanation of why white people looked to Black people to be "the source of hip." Having "lived on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries," Black Americans, in Mailer's thinking, were more attuned to the "moral wildernesses of civilized life" and had thus created a more relativistic "morality of the bottom," in which there was no ultimate good and bad but "an ethical differentiation between the good and bad in every human activity from the go-getter pimp (as opposed to the lazy one) to the relatively dependable pusher or prostitute." Invoking a long-standing racist trope, Mailer argued that Black Americans were more in touch with the "primitive" aspect of human existence. For Mailer, the white hipster was a "white Negro" because he had rejected the normative values of white America and embraced the subversive morality, instincts, and culture of Black America. Norman Mailer, "The White Negro," *Dissent*, Fall 1957, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-white-negro-fall-1957.

enough to shatter both the individual's and society's false sense of peace and security, and to be honest about the ugliness lurking underneath self and society. Mailer praised the hipster for what he saw as their proximity to the "psychopath" and the "barbarian." What the "psychopath knows instinctively" and what the hipster embraced, Mailer argued, was "that to express a forbidden impulse actively is far more beneficial to him than merely to confess the desire in the safety of a doctor's room." The Beat hipster's embrace of rage and transgression was a positive, creative act, capable of "return[ing] us to ourselves," by "envisage[ing] acts of violence as that catharsis which prepares growth."

Dederich's spin-off AA group embraced blunt, transgressive talk as a necessary component of genuine self-knowledge and intimate community life. They took AA's commitment to honesty as a starting point—Step Four, which asked members to make "a searching and fearless moral inventory" of themselves—but injected the element of immediate, harsh confrontation, which was not welcome in AA meetings, into their sessions. If one person irritated another by giving out advice on sobriety even though they had been seen at a bar the week earlier or by recounting an exaggerated play-by-play of some supposedly epic drunken night, then they were subject to "attack."[138] Still, Thompson and Dederich felt that the quest for compassion—Moriarty's "pure" understanding, perhaps—lay at the heart of the sessions, which relied on reciprocity. No one escaped attack forever, but no one was under attack for long. Acceptance was available to all, too, no matter what they admitted to or what lies they had been caught in. Thompson and Dederich even thought of the sessions as a subversive riff on the Catholic practice of confession. "We're confessing one on to another," Thompson explained. "But the Catholic Church only confessed in one direction; it never came back with anything…

[138] Yablonsky, *Tunnel Back*, 49.

[Dederich] said, 'Jesus, we gotta talk back. We gotta confess and then blow love."[139] By spring of 1958, Dederich's Venice-OP AA circle had become incredibly close-knit. Members referred to Dederich's apartment as the "clubhouse," since it had become "the focal point for the social life" of their spin-off chapter.[140] Despite their deviants from the mainstream mold, they still considered themselves part of the AA community and hoped to expand the model to include an alternative path to sobriety.

"Tender Loving Care" and the Creation of Synanon

Thompson and Dederich's involvement in the world of alternative AA created an opening through which drug addicts would join their fledgling club, which they had taken to calling Tender Loving Care (TLC). In May of 1958, Thompson heard that his friend, Eugene Walker, who was addicted to heroin, was facing a prison sentence of five years to life on narcotics charges. Thompson knew that many Los Angeles judges were willing to release alcoholic defendants into the custody of AA members, and he wondered if that approach might extend to addict cases. Together, Thompson and Dederich reached out to Pat Wigger, the AA member who converted three downtown hotels into recovery homes for homeless alcoholics, to advocate on their behalf. It seems likely that Wigger allowed people who were also addicted to narcotics to live in his AA-inspired homes, both because Thompson and Dederich asked him for help in Walker's case and because California's DAR report excluded his hotels from consideration in their 1963 report, as they "were not operated exclusively for alcoholics."[141] Wigger agreed to join Thompson and Dederich in court, lending them legitimacy as they pitched the judge on their club as an alternative to incarceration. "To [their] shock," the judge suspended Walker's sentence

[139] "Gray Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon.
[140] Yablonsky, *Synanon: The Tunnel Back*, 50.
[141] *Recovery establishments for alcoholics,* 8.

and released him into their custody.[142] Walker moved into Thompson's cottage by the beach and started joining in on the sessions. He quickly spread the word about TLC to his friends. Within weeks, two female heroin addicts, "fresh from jail," began attending the synanons, and eventually moved into rooms close to Dederich's apartment.[143]

What started as Thompson's desire to help out a friend became a more active effort to incorporate addicts into their spin-off AA club. Ultimately, TLC would completely absorb part of the addict recovery underground into their community. After Walker and his friends got involved with TLC, Thompson started to attend Hy-Al meetings in Venice Beach.[144] He told Hy-Al members—like Vivian, whose story opened this chapter—that TLC's meetings "weren't testimonials" like AA's were, but "something totally different."[145] As Vivian and others joined the club in the spring and summer of 1958, Hy-Al gradually dissolved and merged with TLC.[146] Vivian recalled that around the time she and her boyfriend moved in, "drug addicts were already beginning to flock to the place," doubling and tripling up in cheap apartments "so as many as possible could squeeze in."[147]

As more addicts and alcoholics moved into TLC's Ocean Park neighborhood, they formed various types of communal living arrangements with each other. There were so many TLC club members in the vicinity of Dederich's street that Thompson referred to it as a "family block."[148] By the summer of 1958, there were about twenty people living in rooms together near

---

[142] "Gray Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon Collection.
[143] Yablonsky, *Tunnel Back*, 50.
[144] It is also possible that Thompson attended Hy-Al meetings before Walker's entry. He had relationships with heroin addicts (like Eugene Walker) that Dederich did not. Before Walker came into the club, Dederich said he "had never met an addict" in his life. See: "CED Edited Works: Ten Years Sober," Box 207, UCLA Synanon
[145] Guy Endore, *Synanon*, 78.
[146] Stone, *My Years with Narcotics Anonymous*, 13; Interview with Jack P, Narcotics Anonymous literature, 9, http://www.nauca.us/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/In-the-Beginning-BOT-History-Project.pdf
[147] Endore, *Synanon*, 78-79.
[148] "Gray Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon.

the clubhouse; within a year, the group grew to forty.[149] Where the AA spin-off group had been all-white—albeit multi-ethnic, as it had a number of Jewish members—TLC was racially integrated by mid-July when Jesse Pratt, the group's first Black member, moved in.[150] That same month, the group pooled their money together to rent an abandoned grocery on the beachfront boardwalk of Ocean Park Promenade.[151] The storefront was rundown, but it was a place where, for the most part, they could do what they wanted. They found old mattresses and "ragged couches" for the main room, where they had also built bunk beds out of scrap lumber for some of the male members to sleep in.[152] In the back room was a toilet and a shower, which "dripped about three drops of water at a time," according to Betty Beckham.[153] Once a week, the group took their grubby furniture out of the store and put it onto the boardwalk so they could hose the floors inside. Afterwards, Dederich recalled, "just for laughs," they would "sit out on the sidewalk in the furniture all day long and look arrogant."[154]

[149] Yablonsky, *The Tunnel Back,* 51, 61.
[150] Essay by Jesse Pratt, October 1958, Box 174, UCLA
[151] Scholars and popular writers have all written that it was only Dederich's thirty-three-dollar unemployment check that paid for the storefront, but that is not accurate. Other members threw in whatever funds they had. This is a good example of how the collective origins of Synanon get narrowed to Dederich's actions alone.
[152] "Bettye Coleman," *Seven Voices of Synanon*, 41.
[153] "Joanna Lee Interview #1 – Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon.
[154] "CED Edited Works: Ten Years Sober," May 14, 1966, Box 207, UCLA Synanon; "Joanna Lee Interview #1 – Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon.



Figure 6: TLC's storefront on Ocean Park Promenade, 1958 or 1959.

The club's physical proximity was matched by a growing emotional intimacy among the members, who were growing accustomed to living and sharing with each other day in and day out. Synanons were still held three nights a week, and contributed greatly to club members' deepening relationships with one another. Vivian felt "warm and protected" within the TLC fold, a feeling that allowed her to participate fully in the synanons, where she was "like an oyster whose shell was being cracked open." "You were exposed and you struggled to cover up," she explained, "but at the same time it was exactly what you wanted. And it was so good afterwards to have the crowd around you—still warm and friendly. In fact, even friendlier. I felt as if reborn."[155] Jesse Pratt also experienced an emotional awakening akin to Vivian's. At first, he "kept looking for a gimmick" or a con that the group might be perpetrating. But "after about five days," he said, "it finally dawned on me that these people were not looking for anything from me except that I keep my sobriety and learn to give them and others what they were giving me—love, attention, understanding, warmth and sincerity, truth… I experienced a feeling that was

[155] Endore, *Synanon*, 78-79.

completely foreign to me, the joy of giving of myself, being able to give of everything that was within me freely [with] no strings, no reservations."[156] Fairly quickly, TLC was moving beyond its beginnings as a spin-off AA group that wanted to experiment with more confrontational, experimental forms of communication. It was becoming an all-encompassing community of its own, with addicts at the core.

The emerging TLC community depended on each other for material subsistence, as well. With hardly any money, they had to figure out how to feed and provide necessary supplies for the group to survive. At one point, club members were "so hungry" that some of the women, who had worked as prostitutes before, volunteered to "go do tricks" to raise funds for food. Thompson remembered thinking "it wasn't a bad plan," but Dederich "vetoed that" immediately. Instead, TLC found support in the Ocean Park community of which they were a vocal, visible part. One man who ran a catering truck for Santa Monica's defense production plants offered to give them the food that he had not used by the end of the day; his operation became TLC's first steady source of food. His offer also gave TLC the idea to start a "hustle group gang," where members would ask local businesses, clubs, churches, and neighbors for donations of food and other supplies.[157] They were successful. The Mormon Church once sent over "a whole pick-up truck of gallon cans of homemade stew, which was terrible," according to Dederich, but essential.[158] Thompson also recalled how "Jewish people on the block would help" by cooking meals for them, as did some of the members' parents.[159]

---

[156] Essay by Jesse Pratt, October 1958, Box 174, UCLA Synanon.
[157] "Gray Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon.
[158] "Transcript: 621208 – Early Synanon History," Box 225, UCLA Synanon. Chuck Dederich spoke with Lewis Yablonsky for Yablonsky's upcoming book on Synanon.
[159] "Gray Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon.

A distinct atmosphere started to coalesce in TLC—lively, spontaneous, intellectually stimulating, and family-like, with Dederich functioning as father figure and teacher. Dozens of people were always congregating there, even if they were not full-time members of the club. At first, TLC's neighbors even thought that the club was "another beatnik place, like the many coffeehouses and artist colonies in diverse, nonconformist Venice-OP.[160] According to Thompson, the club's early days had "no rules or regulations… One day, we'd wake up and say, 'let's go swimming." When Pratt arrived, he also noticed the "warm, relaxed atmosphere [that] seemed to prevail all over the joint." Betty Beckham recalled a mixture of routine and looseness. Typically, group members would "wander over to the club" around nine in the morning to eat breakfast and get "the word of the day" from Dederich about "who was going to cook, who was going to clean, and who was going shopping." After a couple hours of housework, their days were free. Sometimes, members strolled up and down the boardwalk; other days, they sunbathed on the sand. Beckham often went to the beach with a book from Synanon's growing library, sustained by donations from a nearby bookstore where one member worked. Books were always "being passed around," Beckham recalled, typically psychoanalytic ones like Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving* or Leon Joseph Saul's *The Hostile Mind: The Sources and Consequences of Rage and Hate.*[161] Dederich often gave custom recommendations based on what he thought would resonate with a certain person the most. "He started one guy off with Sermon on the Mount," Thompson remembered, "He'd look at another guy and say, 'Aw, this guy's strictly AA,' and he'd get him that book… You'd see these hardcore junkies running around with three books, and they're proud."[162] One member started an afternoon reading group where people gathered on the

[160] Casriel, So Fair a House, 35; Shrank, *Art and the City.*
[161] "Joanna Lee Interview #1 – Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon.
[162] "Gray Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon.

bunk beds of the storefront's main room to discuss a text of their choosing. During one session, members discussed psychoanalyst G.H. Pearson's *Adolescence and the Conflict of Generations,* looking for insight into "exactly what motivated us during our adolescence into using narcotics." Club members also did art, too; the walls were covered with paintings of a sitting Buddha, a lotus flower, and a bent metal spoon used to cook heroin.[163] Three nights a week, synanons were held in different members' "pads" around the boardwalk, and then hang out afterwards.[164] Other nights, Dederich might give a talk on an Emerson essay he had just read, or the group would talk and dance to records until the wee hours of the night.

The loose, even casual vibe in the club extended to its approach to sobriety, as well. While club members were sincerely interested in ending their addiction, many were not totally sober. They stayed away from heroin more than they had outside of the community, but they also "chipped" on the side, which meant that they occasionally used drugs. The fact of chipping was common knowledge in the club. Even Dederich knew it occurred, though, according to a member, "he didn't know who, what, where, or when."[165] During the club's first year in the Ocean Park storefront, Dederich and others made the active choice not to patrol other members' activities. Sobriety was the goal, but it was not the most fundamental requirement of participation in the community. What mattered more was that members were engaged in the collective effort towards sobriety, and that they stayed honest about their behavior, whatever it was. "Chuck would always say," Thompson recalled, "If a guy was going to sit at our fireside and eat our food, right now, the rule today, is that we don't shoot smack. We do this a day at a time… He'd get very offended if a guy shot smack and lied. He didn't get offended if a guy shot

[163] "On the Go with Jack Linkletter, Synanon" television spot, aired July 24, 1959, in UCLA Film and Television Archive, Powell Library.
[164] "Joanna Lee Interview #1 – Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon.
[165] Casriel, *So Fair a House,* 33.

smack."[166] For the most part, chipping members took it upon themselves to abide by the spirit of TLC. They stored drugs off the premises of the clubhouse and shared apartments and tried to regulate their use—smoking marijuana instead of using heroin, or taking "a little fix" instead of getting "overloaded."[167] When Eugene Walker returned to heavy, regular heroin use, he did not enter the clubhouse. During that period, Thompson remembered him sitting on the beach about fifteen feet away from the back door, reading Carl Jung's *Modern Man in Search of a Soul.* The other members did not sit with him, but they brought him food occasionally. After Walker "cleaned up," he returned to the clubhouse.[168]

The idea behind TLC was to give addicts and alcoholics the psychic permission to slow down, read, and contemplate in the company of others interested in pursuing a similar journey. Thompson recalled that Dederich would "always talk about 'a breath of fresh air'" when describing the club. The idea was to get people "the proper reading material and trying to get some type of element [to] surround [them], where a guy could read and meditate and not have a lot of pressure to produce an income and break his lifestyle." It was not about forcing sobriety, which members believed was both impossible and undesirable. Instead, it was a place where sobriety was contemplated, discussed, encouraged, and worked towards. It was also a place where people wanted to be, irrespective of their capacity to quit drugs right then and there. "We were having so much fun," Thompson said. "We thought it was very important to be by the ocean" and "just to try to have some type of shelter" where they could live on their own terms.[169] The club was a refuge and a glimpse of another way of living, one that a person could embrace or not. Participation had to be voluntary. This was a radical vision to extend to drug addicts in an

[166] "Gray Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon.
[167] Casriel, *So Fair a House,* 33.
[168] "Gray Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon.
[169] "Gray Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon.

era of consensus around mandating addicts' sobriety through surveillance, arrest, and institutional confinement.

TLC's vision challenged certain tenets of mainstream society in the United States. The club rejected the prevailing notion that heroin was more dangerous than alcohol or that any particular substance was inherently bad in the first place. Thompson described their thinking: "There's nothing wrong with smack. We got pretty sophisticated about that. It really didn't make any difference what level you wanted to get into behind smack, booze… You know, what were we really talking about? Smack might be good for you, I don't know. We were open to bare possibilities." Thompson's point was not that TLC encouraged heroin use, but that they would not participate in its demonization, nor that of its users, especially not when other mind-altering, addictive substances were legal and popular. Moreover, TLC members questioned the ethics and desirability of mainstream society. For all the popular anxiety over "dope fiends," the "squares" were capable of plenty of irrationality and violence themselves. "Good guys worked eight hours a day," Thompson explained, "and come home and beat the shit out of their wives, buy new cards, load up their credit cards—they don't have time to walk on water and read books." He felt that TLC members "were very dangerous people" not because they were addicts, but because they were addicts and they had the audacity to relax on the beach instead of trying to secure a job, a home, or new consumer goods, the markers of respectable citizenship. Simply by existing, their community "was almost a total battle against the current culture."[170]

TLC's total embrace of addicts, as well as their unorthodox methods, also led to their formal break with AA Throughout the spring and summer of 1958, TLC members regularly

[170] "Grey Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon.

attended AA meetings. This changed in August 1958, when at least one chapter in Santa Monica barred TLC members from their meetings. Dederich and Thompson attributed this decision to the fact that they went to meetings in large groups and basically "took [them] over."[171] It is unclear whether "taking over" meant simply that their mixed group of addicts and alcoholics was a highly visible presence in otherwise conventional AA meetings, or that the TLC group tried to steer the typical meeting format into something more like their confrontational sessions. Either one would have been a problem. In the case of the former, AA had already decided that alcoholism and drug addiction were separate issues requiring separate organizations. Addict mutual aid groups were free to draw from AA's model, and, according to Bill Wilson, attend open meetings like non-drinkers could, but they could not merge with AA[172] In the latter case, TLC's efforts to inject new influences and styles of communication into the meetings would likely have frustrated AA members who had no interest in changing the model that they felt was instrumental to their sobriety.

The split was also reflective of a deeper clash between TLC's nonconformist recovery culture and that of mainstream AA, which often equated sobriety with re-entry into the world of middle-class respectability. Dederich traced the beginning of the end back to his decision to participate in UCLA's LSD trials. "I had done performed the unpardonable sin," he asserted. "I had taken a drug."[173] Then he started to bring dozens of addict members to AA meetings. According to Dederich and Thompson, the sense that the TLC group was corrupting AA's model with involvement in drugs went beyond the issue of separate addictions—it was also an issue of

[171] "Gray Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon; "Transcript: 621208 – Early Synanon History," Box 225, UCLA Synanon.
[172] Bill Wilson stated this in a letter to the founder of Los Angeles' Habit Forming Drugs group when she asked if their club members could be fully accepted into the AA community. Stone, "My Years with Narcotics Anonymous," pp. 12-13; White, et al, "Narcotics Anonymous," 13.
[173] "Transcript: 621208 – Early Synanon History," Box 225, UCLA Synanon

prejudice. In general, "alkys didn't like the addicts," Dederich recalled. More than that, A.A's entry into the postwar mainstream had come from positioning themselves as a fellowship for white, middle-class men on the road to reassimilation, not affiliating themselves with minority groups and social outcasts. Many TLC members had worked as prostitutes or had criminal records of some kind. The club was also racially integrated at a time when AA was unofficially but typically segregated.[174] Thompson believed that TLC "caused a lot of animosity" because they brought people into the meetings with whom most AA members did not want to associate or be associated. Thompson recalled their group "really shaking AA bad" by bringing "a dozen good-looking hookers" to the meetings. The "thinking at this time" in AA and United States society more broadly, according to Thompson, was that prostitutes were "not sick; they're just hookers and because they have to shoot smack, that makes them even worse." Even though they were "all cleaned up," the overwhelming feeling seemed to be "that [they had] nothing to do with Alcoholics Anonymous."[175] Even some of the members of Dederich's original spin-off AA group left TLC as the chasm between the two groups became insurmountable.[176]

---

[174] Rotskoff argues that racial discrimination marred the otherwise welcoming policy of A.A. chapters. Segregation was not universal throughout A.A. chapters; some places formally excluded Black members, while others made it generally known that Black members would not be welcome. A "common solution" would have white A.A. members encourage Black newcomers to form their own chapters. Bill Wilson, Rotskoff notes, came to see the segregationist impulses of many white A.A. members as an "example of the fellowship's—and, indeed, of humankind's—'limitations,' a weakness that might eventually be remedied but that did not spark in him a sense of urgency for concerted political action." Rotskoff, *Love on the Rocks*, pp. 119-120. Given A.A.'s anarchic structure, though, individual chapters and regions were sometimes integrated. In Los Angeles in 1948, a reporter from the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, a Black newspaper, attended a large A.A. meeting and commented on how racially and ethnically diverse it was. Whether this was broadly representative of A.A. life in Los Angeles isn't clear, since A.A. didn't keep firm statistics on membership, let alone the demographics of members. Hart, LeRoy S. "'Alcoholics Anonymous'—Yes, It Works!' January 29, 1949, PQHN: *Los Angeles Sentinel*, p. 4.

[175] "Gray Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon

[176] Dederich would later frame this decision as a good thing, but Thompson remembered it hitting them both hard. "We were still AA cats," Thompson recalled. "But AA just didn't want us. They had rejected us." Both Thompson and Dederich had understood their experimentation and embrace of addicts as belonging to the AA movement, as embracing its principles in a new way. It is possible that Dederich rewrote the story a bit in later years, as him choosing to leave AA other than AA casting him and TLC out. Losing his own recovery community was a major thing to happen to a man who was only two years sober and had made AA his entire life. He went from participant to leader, which suited his ego in many ways, no doubt, but left him lonely, too—something Dederich seemed to

After their break with AA, the club officially became a separate entity known as Synanon. When Dederich decided to file for incorporation in August, he discovered that the name Tender Loving Care was already taken. "Synanon" seemed like a good substitute, as it honored the sessions that had started the whole experiment and were so evocative of the club's atmosphere. On September 18, 1958, Synanon received its certificate of incorporation as a non-profit corporation "formed specifically and exclusively for… charitable, scientific and educational purposes" by the State of California.[177] Its six-person Board of Directors included a majority of people from the original AA spin-off group, like Adaline Ainlay and Thompson, as well as Pratt, Synanon's first Black addict member.[178]

The phenomenon that Synanon would become was unknown to its members, even to Dederich. At one point during the split, Thompson counseled Dederich to stay in AA, leave the addicts behind, and "get on with our lives," but "Chuck wouldn't listen to that. He thought that we should make a substantial stand… 'I don't know what I'm doing,' [Dederich would] say, 'but it will emerge.'"[179] Over the winter of 1958, the group started to forge their own traditions out of those they had learned from AA They held Saturday night parties every week to replace AA open houses and moved their thrice-weekly synanons to 8:30 P.M., "because that [was] the normal time for AA meetings in Los Angeles." Dederich felt certain that this was his calling, even though it had cost him his membership in AA "I was not concerned anymore about what I was going to do with the rest of my life," Dederich recalled, "and I [wasn't even] too concerned about how I was going to eat."[180] Thompson was struck by Dederich's "total faith in what he was

realize more by the early-late 1970s. See, "Gray Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon.

[177] "Certificate of Incorporation for Synanon Foundation, Inc., State of California," Box 530, UCLA Synanon.

[178] "Transcript: 621208 – Early Synanon History," Box 225, UCLA Synanon.

[179] "Gray Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon

[180] "Transcript: 621208 – Early Synanon History," Box 225, UCLA Synanon.

doing," though he also remembered the feeling of uncertainty that pervaded the post-split period. The club "didn't have a dime" to its name and members lived "in little flea bags with a little old broken-down warehouse, and the chances of survival of that place were a thousand to one." There was no clear sense of the future other than keeping their "beatnik treehouse" alive—living together, reading, discussing, staying honest and trying to stay sober, and seeing what would "emerge" next.[181]

Synanon people's campaign to fully incorporate drug addicts within AA's social world, as well as their openness to alter and even defy certain principles of AA's method, culminated in a separation between the groups so total that it would end up obscuring how intertwined they once were. Synanon's recovery counterculture set the stage for the schism; the same nonconformist sensibility that moved Dederich and his AA friends to embrace addicts also motivated them to experiment with different paths to sobriety, from LSD to meditation to their cooperatively-created "synanon" sessions. They bucked the idea that sobriety meant a return to mainstream, middle-class life. The addition of drug addicts in their club would only intensify this shift going forward, since many of them had (or at least felt that they had) an extremely slim chance of shaking off the "dope fiend" stigma and achieving success by conventional standards.

[181] "Synanon Timeline," made by Synanon historians in the late-1970s, author's personal collection.

Chapter 3:

Getting Clean "In the Stream of Life": Sobriety, Self-Realization, and Community in Synanon House, 1959-1965

> The word "therapy,' in my opinion, is a little bit ridiculous. Where does therapy stop and living begin? A half a sandwich is therapy for a starving man.
>
> — Chuck Dederich, 1965[1]

In October 1965, Reid Kimball stood in front of a group of undergraduates at San Fernando Valley State College and "ran his story," in Synanon speak. He talked about how he started using heroin and how it grew out of control, how he started pimping and committing increasingly risky armed robberies—"we'd actually drive in broad daylight to Beverly Hills and stick up a restaurant"—to fund his habit. He detailed all the "cures" he tried, fruitlessly, to stop using, from the sanitarium in Pasadena to his three stays in Camarillo State Hospital.[2] He finished his talk by explaining how he had stumbled upon Synanon, how it grabbed his attention, and then how it changed his life. At first glance, it might appear that college administrators had asked Kimball to play the part of a walking cautionary tale, meant to warn young people about the dangers of drugs. But that was not the case. Kimball had actually been invited by Dr. Lewis Yablonsky to give a guest lecture for his criminology course. In fact, Yablonsky had turned over his entire course to Synanon people, whom he believed were at the cutting-edge of the field, doing things about which his academic colleagues had only theorized. He considered them experts in their own condition and beyond—as people with nuanced, compelling ideas about addiction, sobriety, and society.

[1] "Transcript: 651026—SFVSC #3 Ten Questions," Box 229, UCLA Synanon.
[2] Transcript: 651130 – SFVSC #8 Saga of Reid Kimball," Box 230, UCLA Synanon.

At the end of Kimball's talk, an undergraduate asked him to delineate how Synanon differed from existing institutions that provided addiction treatment. Kimball responded as follows:

> [I]ts differences are endless. You just can't answer without going into all the ramifications of what Synanon is, all the mechanisms, devices, and the mystiques and the premises that it is based on. There's no way really to say what there is at Synanon that is not at Camarillo. There's no similarity between the two places… There's no basis for comparison.[3]

Kimball's answer, refuting the very premise of the student's question, points towards the key ideas of this chapter. First, he rejected the idea that Synanon was just another place for addiction treatment that may have used different techniques but was essentially engaged in the same activity. It was impossible to compare and contrast Synanon and Camarillo, Kimball suggested, because Synanon was a completely different type of place, with a completely different understanding of what getting clean meant, how to do it, and to what ends. Second, Kimball took it as a given that there was real intellectual depth to Synanon—to its "mechanisms [and] devices" and "the premises that it [was] based on." He was there for that very reason, to explain the practices and philosophies of his community. Third, Kimball gestured to a certain ineffability—the "mystiques"—that made Synanon what it was. Its ways could not be easily systematized or duplicated, for it was not just a place where people tried to get clean. It was a place where people made a collective home out of an abandoned building and a family out of dozens, then hundreds, of people who were once strangers and social outcasts. It was in the realm of things, like falling in love or finding God, that were experienced and felt, but hard to fully capture with language and impossible to prescribe or compel.

[3] Transcript: 651130 – SFVSC #8 Saga of Reid Kimball," Box 230, UCLA Synanon.

Emphasizing Synanon's unique complexity, Kimball's answer does not square with the conventional narrative that seems to find the group all too easy to pinpoint: a drug rehabilitation center that became, at some point, a cult or cult-adjacent place built around the whims of its founder, Chuck Dederich.[4] As a drug rehab, Synanon has been described as practicing controversial, even abusive, methods—specifically, "cold turkey" withdrawal and "attack therapy," the latter of which refers to what Synanon people in the late 1950s and early 1960s called the "small-s synanon." Depending on where a scholar lands on the cult question, Synanon's methods have also been read as Dederich's efforts to control, and, in one account, even "brainwash," his followers.[5] Neither approach acknowledges the "mechanisms," "devises," "mystiques," and "premises" of Synanon as particularly worth studying. Nor do they take into account the myriad perspectives of the one thousand-plus people who, at one point or another, lived in Synanon House during its first six years.[6]

This chapter approaches Synanon as an original, collaborative, and sophisticated body of knowledge and practice about "getting clean" in the postwar United States. It does so by delving into the nitty-gritty details of everyday life, as Synanon people forged a home, family, and mini-society in the beach towns of Los Angeles. First, Synanon people did not think of themselves as engaging in addiction treatment in any clinical sense. They had reasons for why addicts should withdraw from, or "kick," drugs in a certain way, and why small-s synanons were necessary, but those reasons existed within a broader conceptual framework that was communal, not medical in nature. Second, Synanon people helped create the "mechanisms" that they used, just as they thought deeply about the "premises" on which they were based. While they saw Dederich as

[4] Janzen, *The Rise and Fall of Synanon;* Clark, *The Recovery Revolution;* William White, *Slaying the Dragon.*
[5] Richard Ofshe, "The Social Development of the Synanon Cult," Kaye, *Enforcing Freedom*
[6] "Synanon Members as of 11/1/64*,"* Folder "CED: Statistics," Box 530, UCLA Synanon.

leader of their community, they devoted themselves to Synanon for their own reasons, based on the experiences, insights, and camaraderie that they had there. Third, they explored the idea that getting clean was a springboard towards self-realization and new ways of living collectively. They believed it was necessary to live in an environment where addicts were wanted and respected, and where they had authority over their own path to sobriety—so they built one. In the process, they created an integrated, mixed-sex, self-governing commune that experimented with alternative social, economic, and familial relations. Instead of sobriety being something that addicts had to attain so they could be let back into the society from which they had been ostracized, in Synanon it was framed as an opportunity to create a new society, based on what they found important, pleasurable, and compelling.

"Beatnik treehouse" to sober commune: Synanon House takes shape, 1959-1965

From its earliest days, Synanon was a collective endeavor that evolved organically, shaped by its surroundings in postwar Los Angeles and the people who gravitated towards it. As members started to feel a growing commitment to Synanon and their own efforts to get clean, the place shifted from a ragtag "beatnik treehouse" to a more permanent, organized sober commune.[7]

Since Dederich's spin-off A.A. sessions took off in February 1958, Synanon had grown rapidly, from fourteen alcoholic members to some sixty or seventy members, most of whom were drug addicts.[8] There were no firm rules about participation. Many members lived together in the storefront or in shared rooms close to the club, since the Venice-OP neighborhood was full of inexpensive housing, from apartments to hostels and tenements, to accommodate them. Other

[7] "Synanon Timeline," made by Synanon historians in the late-1970s, author's personal collection.
[8] Gray Thompson put this number much higher, to about one hundred or more people circulating around the clubhouse, while Betty Beckham remembered forty-five to fifty members. I have split the difference, more or less. See: "Gray Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58; "Joanna Lee Interview #1 – Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon.

members just attended synanons and hung around the clubhouse when they felt like it. The atmosphere was loose, with "no rules or regulations," as Grey Thompson put it, and an emphasis on play and spontaneity.[9] They sunbathed and swam during the day; they danced and played bongo drums until late at night.[10] Passersby often assumed that Synanon was another beat coffeehouse in diverse, nonconformist Venice-OP.[11] Even in September 1958, when Synanon formally incorporated as a California non-profit organization, it was still mostly anarchic in structure and lacking a clear future direction. According to Thompson, "the chances of survival" of their "little old broken-down warehouse" felt like "a thousand to one. This was just a summer shot." It was fun, and if it "got one guy cleaned up" for good, it would have exceeded his own expectations. Dederich was committed to maintaining a place for addicts to help each other stop using drugs, but he too was unsure of what lay ahead for Synanon. His mantra at the time—perhaps influenced by his readings in Zen Buddhism—was, "It will emerge."[12]

Municipal politics altered the course of Synanon's future, as city officials cracked down on eclectic Ocean Park and literally shuttered the group's doors in the process. In what historian Elsa Devienne has called "urban renewal by the sea," Santa Monica officials "worked to transform what they saw as 'blighted' beaches into modern playgrounds… for the suburban age."[13] Their key target was Ocean Park, which belonged to the incorporated city of Santa Monica—unlike Venice Beach, was part of Los Angeles County. The so-called Ocean Park

[9] Grey Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts, Box 58, UCLA Synanon
[10] Synanon actually did not have any bongos until the production staff of a local news show, "On the Go with Jack Linkletter," gave them to the club. In early summer 1959, Linkletter and crew visited Synanon as a feature subject and wanted Synanon members to play bongos during taping, so the audience could get the picture that this was an unconventional, beatnik-type place. After taping, the crew left the drums at Synanon, and they became a part of the nightly ritual. "Transcript: 621208 – Early Synanon History," Box 225, UCLA Synanon.
[11] Transcript: 621029 – Betty, Chuck and Citizen, Box 225, UCLA Synanon.
[12] "Grey Thompson Interviews 1 & 2 1978 Rough Transcripts," Box 58, UCLA Synanon
[13] Devienne, "Urban Renewal by the Sea," 100.

Redevelopment District (OPRD) stretched from Belmar, a Black neighborhood since the turn of the century, in the north, to Venice in the south.[14] What officials considered "blighted," Ocean Park residents saw as a "safe haven," Devienne argues, for groups excluded from white leisure spaces and nonconformists of many stripes.[15] For instance, Belmar's Bay Street Beach, also known as the "Inkwell," was a refuge for Black beachgoers, while Crystal Beach, located just south of Belmar, was a known spot for gay and lesbian Angelenos to enjoy the coast.[16] About six blocks south of Crystal Beach was Synanon, as well as a host of beat art studios and cafes.[17] According to Devienne, these sites did not align with Santa Monica's vision of a beachfront that accommodated "the tastes of white middle class families," their desired tourist demographic.[18] In 1957, the City of Santa Monica approved a plan to raze the OPRD in order to clear space for a freeway extension, parking lots, new and more expensive housing, and the "rehabilitation of the Ocean Park [Pier] amusement area for a family type entertainment."[19]

Santa Monica officials succeeded in destroying much of the "safe havens" in Ocean Park. Belmar was split in two by the freeway extension, while Santa Monica police officers raided Crystal Beach's gay bars and bathhouses, which the city then condemned and demolished.[20] The pier "rehabilitation" project also directly imperiled Synanon. Back in 1956, Santa Monica had leased the pier to a private company that aimed to build an explicitly family-friendly amusement

---

[14] Inter-department memo from Russell F. Priebe, Executive Director of the Ocean Park Redevelopment Agency, to Robert G. Cockins, Santa Monica City Attorney, April 6, 1959, Subject: "Ocean Park Project No. Ib," Santa Monica City Hall Records.
[15] Devienne, "Urban Renewal by the Sea," p. 100.
[16] Jefferson, "African American Leisure Space in Santa Monica;" Devienne, "Urban Renewal by the Sea." Jefferson notes how the beach was also called the "Inkwell" by some. It was used first, she explains, by racist white Angelenos, then later reappropriated by some Black beachgoers but not all.
[17] Shrank, *Art and the City.*
[18] Devienne, "Urban Renewal by the Sea," 100.
[19] "SM Report Calls '56-57 Gateway to Bright Era;" "Master Plan Discussion Set Monday," December 7, 1957, Santa Monica *Evening Outlook,* Santa Monica Public Library records, microfilm.
[20] Jefferson, "African American Leisure Space in Santa Monica;" Devienne, "Urban Renewal by the Sea;" Shrank, *Art and the City,* 112-113.

park to rival the newly-opened Disneyland. In July 1958, the nautical-themed Pacific Ocean Park opened to the public, which city planners assumed would consist of car-driving suburbanites taking day trips to the beach. As a result, Synanon's block (and others like it) was set aside to be razed and converted into a parking lot. In May 1959, city inspectors examined Synanon's storefront and condemned the building on the grounds that "people [were] living in a building with improper sanitation and fire-prevention facilities."[21] Club members could not dispute this assessment; a group of men slept in DIY bunk beds that they had hammered into the clubhouse's front room, and, due to its lack of running water, had to shower and use the toilet off premises. They moved out of the storefront in hopes that the condemnation would be reversed if the clubhouse was no longer serving as a residence. Instead, in August 1959, Synanon received notice from the city that their building was scheduled for demolition in September.



Figure 7: Fire insurance map of Ocean Park Promenade, 1950. Synanon's storefront was located at 2801 Promenade, the left-most box colored red before the map ends. It lay directly across the Pacific Ocean and to the left of the Ocean Park Pier. The yellow rectangles are apartment and tenement buildings.

[21] Casriel, *So Fair a House,* 35



Figure 8: Fire insurance map of Ocean Park Promenade, 1963. Synanon's entire block had been razed, as had much of the apartment and tenement housing.

Though Santa Monica's urban renewal program destroyed Synanon's physical clubhouse, it had the unintended effect of facilitating a more cohesive, dedicated internal culture among Synanon members. Gone were the days when wandering in and out of the club for nightly gatherings and reading groups could be taken for granted; as of August 1959, the continued existence of Synanon was up in the air. What exactly Synanon was and what it meant to its members—suddenly, those were questions about which members had to think and make decisions. If they wanted to continue this experiment in communal living and sobriety, they would have to take deliberate action to keep Synanon alive. The looming eviction turned participation into Synanon a more self-conscious act, one in which choosing to belong to the club

increasingly came with a desire to protect and a sense of ownership over their fledgling collective.

A clear example of this internal shift was how Synanon members changed their response to drug use within the club. Until the summer of 1959, being in Synanon meant that a person was interested in getting "clean," but not that they actually were. It was general knowledge among club members that many of them still "chipped," or used drugs occasionally, as discussed in Chapter 2. This state of affairs changed in July 1959, one month after Santa Monica inspectors condemned Synanon's building. Late one night, a club member named Jack Hurst saw another member, Kenny Dunne, hide a small bag in an alley near the storefront. Hurst belonged to a group within the club that abstained completely from drugs and occasionally confronted other members who chipped. (The chipping members referred to them, sarcastically, as the "Vice Squad.") Hurst followed Dunne into the clubhouse and accused him of being high. Kenny denied the claim, and as the conflict unfolded between the two men, other members started to gather around them, watching. One spectator was Reid Kimball, a friend of Dunne's before either of them had moved into Synanon. Kimball had been living in the club for six weeks and he knew that Dunne chipped because they had used drugs together. It was also "obvious," Kimball said, "[that] Kenny was half-loaded" that night. Some members joined Hurst in confronting Dunne, "reiterating to him that, 'This isn't a court… You're not going to go to jail, but we do want to clean this [place] up." If he would not admit that he had used heroin and entered the club, they said, he could "get lost." Dunne continued to deny the charge and started to pack his suitcase. In that moment, Kimball had an epiphany:

> At that point, I snapped—that is, I knew they meant it. They weren't going to turn him into the police… All they wanted him to do was say, 'O.K., I did it'… Finally, at one point, I said, 'For God's sake, Kenny, this isn't a federal beef.' I had the code of the streets pretty strong… I didn't believe in anybody copping out either, but I'd felt, for Christ's sake, you owe them a bone or

> something… [I said], 'Goddamnit, I've used. You and I have fixed today and blown pot together and done everything else… Come on, let's give this shit up.'

In that moment, Kimball started to feel more solidarity with Hurst and the members asking Dunne to "cop out" to using drugs than he did with his friend with whom he had long shared "the code of the streets," which equated "copping out" with cowardice and disloyalty. Outside of Synanon, "copping out" occurred in the context of the criminal justice system, and it was an ironclad rule among men like Kimball and Dunne—who used illicit drugs, worked as pimps, and engaged in petty theft—that they would not sell out a friend to the police or a prosecutor in order to save themselves. When Kimball "snapped," he realized that, in Synanon, the rule did not really apply. He believed that neither Hurst nor anyone else in the club would turn Dunne over to the authorities for admitting to using drugs. He thought that Dunne "owe[d] them a bone" because they were demanding the truth as a way to protect the integrity of the club, not to punish him. More than that, Kimball felt that Dunne was about to leave "for really no reason," which worried him.[22] To Kimball and other club members, leaving meant a probable return to addiction and incarceration, and possibly even death. Within Synanon, exposing a friend's drug use started to feel not like a betrayal, but the loyal, caring, sane action to take. Kimball also experienced a shift in how he understood his relationship to Synanon as a whole. Initially, he could use drugs and evade the Vice Squad without feeling bad about it; he was staying in the club, sure, but he held himself separate from it, in a sense. Synanon's goals were not necessarily his own; their paths might not always converge. The night that Dunne almost left was the first time that Kimball started to see himself as someone responsible for holding Synanon together, someone who would intervene on behalf of its philosophy and practices even when it clashed with his prior way of thinking and living.

[22] Casriel, *So Fair a House*, 32.

Other members also felt their loyalties shift to Synanon during "The Night of the Big Cop-Out," as it became known in the club. After Kimball's admission, they started to own up to their chipping. At first, Dunne screamed that Kimball was a "son-of-a-bitch" for taking Hurst's side. But after a moment, he acknowledged that he had, in fact, been using drugs throughout his time at the club. The confessions of others followed. "Well, I've blown some pot and drank some turp[entine]," one man said. "Yeah, I've scored some [heroin]," said another.[23] At some point during the spontaneous confessions, someone left to get Chuck Dederich, who was sleeping at his apartment nearby. Dederich walked into the clubhouse to see men and women "all draped on top of double-decker beds and peering out from lower bunks, standing around and all yelling." He gave a "real emotional talk about their childish games of self-destruction," which seemed to solidify the sense among club members that a new ethos was being established.[24] "[F]rom that point on," Kimball explained, "the attitude and feeling developed that no one had to shoot dope anymore." Not only did the majority of the club think "that it was kind of ridiculous to start again," they also felt that all present and future members should have to make a choice upon entering Synanon: commit to total sobriety or leave. Over the following couple weeks, about twenty people left the club and approximately forty-five people stayed, of which Kimball was one. According to one member, those who remained became "the core of group strength in Synanon."[25]

It was this "core" group who forged a new home for Synanon as their eviction from the Ocean Park storefront loomed. For help, they called upon their growing base of local supporters who donated food and supplies and attended Saturday night parties. Their cause was likely aided

[23] Casriel, *So Fair a House*, 32.
[24] Yablonsky, *Tunnel Back*, 66.
[25] Casriel, *So Fair a House*, p. 33; 36.

by a local television show's July 1959 episode on Synanon in which the host visited the clubhouse and praised their "unorthodox" conviction that "addicts can help themselves." [26] Around that time, a Santa Monica resident named Ephraim Ralph reached out to Dederich about an unusual property that he owned (and lived next door to).[27] It was a three-story beachfront building that had been a private beach club during Los Angeles's 1920s boom era and an officers' club and armory during World War II. Vacant for years, the place had fallen into disrepair. Ralph offered the former armory to Synanon at a reduced rent of five hundred dollars per month—one hundred and fifty dollars lower than the previous rate—if they would sign a two-year lease. The club agreed to Ralph's terms despite not having the funds to pay even the first month's rent, hoping that a solution would emerge somehow, which it did. In August, a month before the storefront's demolition, the Friars' Club of California, a private club for entertainers started by comedian Milton Berle, put down a deposit on the property and verbally promised to pay Synanon's rent for the entity of the lease.[28] The group was set to move into the building in mid-August.

[26] *On the Go with Jack Linkletter,* "On the Go, Synanon," aired July, 24, 1959, UCLA Film and Television Archive, Powell Library.
[27] *Report of the California Assembly Interim Committee on Criminal Procedure*, 1962 (statement of Ephraim Ralph), 109.
[28] Charles Dederich, *Seven Voices of Synanon*, 63; Casriel, *So Fair A House*, 35-36



Figure 9: Synanon's new home, the "armory," on Santa Monica beach, circa 1960.

For many club members, moving to the armory was a leap of faith that Synanon could transition from a ragtag gathering place to a more cohesive, permanent settlement. Residents vacillated between nerves and excitement regarding the move. "We were pretty scared," resident Charlie Hamer recalled. "[We thought,] 'We'll just go down there and fall on our ass."[29] Betty Beckham remembered seeing the armory for the first time and being awestruck by its scope: "It looked like a mansion!"[30] Club members felt comfortable in the colorful, nonconformist atmosphere of Ocean Park, where they could scrape by without a lot of money. The new building was only a mile and a half north from their storefront, but it meant leaving Ocean Park for a

[29] Yablonsky, *Tunnel Back*, 25.
[30] "Joanna Lee Interview #1 – Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon.

middle-class neighborhood—and one that was just a few blocks away from the wealthy, exclusive "Gold Coast" where movie stars, Hollywood power players, and real estate developers had homes. It also meant leaving a more improvised set of living arrangements, where members lived off-premises and came and went from the clubhouse as they pleased, for a genuinely communal home. In the armory, all forty-five members would live under one roof, and would have to take on the responsibilities that came with a larger-scale operation.[31]

Synanon members worked together to create a livable, comfortable environment within the long-abandoned armory. The building was, according to Beckham, "big, old, [and] ragged;" another resident described it as a "large empty monster."[32] The electricity was not hooked up upon their arrival, so they spent the first nights in darkness punctured only slightly by candlelight. Dederich remembered that the toilets were so dirty and broken-down "you couldn't even urinate in them, let alone sit on them." [33] Hamer recounted seeing "grease an inch thick on everything."[34] Turning the place into a communal residence would take serious, sustained labor. "The first thing we did," Dederich said, "was open up the doors and windows and get started with a steam cleaner," then "[we] scraped to get the crap off the floor" and "wire-brushed and began to put on paint."[35] Residents split into groups that matched the type of work with which they felt most comfortable. Beckham and Hamer gravitated towards the kitchen, whose grill "had a thick coat of crud on it."[36] Hamer described how they "chipped at it with chipping hammers, like you do at sea, for two or three days." Beckham made coffee and sandwiches for everyone,

[31] As Synanon grew in the early 1960s, they would rent apartments close to the armory, where Directors and Synanon members who had been in the house longest lived.
[32] Bettye Coleman, *Seven Voices of Synanon*, 42; Casriel, *So Fair A House*, 35-36.
[33] "Transcript: 620000A CED on Venice," Box 224, UCLA Synanon.
[34] Yablonsky, *Tunnel Back*, 25.
[35] "Transcript: 620000A CED on Venice," Box 224, UCLA Synanon.
[36] Yablonsky, *Tunnel Back*, 25.

since the kitchen was so "filthy [that] you couldn't cook in there."[37] Other members replaced the toilets and removed debris from the building, so much that they filled multiple truckloads. Over the first few months, the group converted the top and ground floors into men's and women's dormitories, respectively. The second floor held the kitchen, dining hall, living area, and a number of other rooms. (In time, rooms on the second floor and in the basement would be converted into art and dance studios, a space for musical instruments and band practice, a darkroom, and a theater.)[38] Over the entrance facing the Pacific Ocean, they hung a placard bearing their name: "Synanon House."



Figure 10: Jack Hurst, one-time member of the "Vice Squad," working on the armory, circa 1960.

[37] Bettye Coleman, *Seven Voices of Synanon*, 42
[38] "Origin and Development of Synanon," *Report of Assembly Interim Committee on Criminal Procedure*, California Assembly, January 1963, Box 121, UCLA Synanon.

The move to the armory marked the beginning of a different era for Synanon. There was a unity of purpose that had not existed before, as well as a dawning sense of a shared communal future. It felt like, according to one resident, "the first time that Synanon really had a home."[39]



Figure 11: Sunbathing in front of Synanon House, 1961.

Getting Clean and Forging the Synanon Collective

Getting clean in Synanon was not a clinical program of treatment, but a gradual folding into the rhythms and activities of daily life in the house, which Synanon people believed were essential both for self-transformation and communal harmony. While they sometimes casually referred to their "sickness" (for which heroin was "medicine), Synanon people did not find much use in the mid-twentieth century disease concept of addiction, which called for medical expertise

[39] Casriel, *So Fair a House*, 36.

and mandatory institutional treatment. They saw addiction as reflective of more universal, existential struggles and believed that not using drugs was only the first step. In Synanon, addiction was a particular way that human beings failed to live well, connect deeply with others, and find a place where they felt welcomed, loved, and capable of contributing something beneficial to their fellows. Getting clean was a long-term, all-encompassing process that entailed creating a good life, harmonious community, and purposeful self.

Before delving into the details of Synanon's philosophy and practices, it is important to examine who actually constituted the Synanon collective during its formative years. First, despite the group's commitment to sobriety, new arrivals were not necessarily hell-bent on getting clean. Whereas the holders of the institutional consensus emphasized the problem of "motivation" and justified the use of state force due to addicts' supposed lack of it, Synanon people did not attach much importance to a person's initial reason for arriving at their door. Plenty of newcomers made their way to Synanon out of a mixture of curiosity and skepticism; they wanted to see what an addict-run place looked like, even as they also expected to be disappointed. In the spring of 1959, Reda Levy was ten days out of Lexington hospital when she got a letter from a friend and fellow "junkie" in her New York City jazz circle telling her about "a bunch of hypes living on the beach in Santa Monica… who were trying to do something for each other." Having nearly "killed [herself]" with sleeping pills the night before, she decided to "see what [Synanon] was, and if it didn't exist," she could always find drugs in Los Angeles. Levy did not think that she was "taking a change" in any major sense.[40] (In 1965, Levy was still living in Synanon and had married a fellow member.)[41] Others showed up because the police were looking for them, or

[40] "Transcript: 640108 – Lew, Reda, Frank at U.C.L.A," Box 227, UCLA Synanon.
[41] "Five Year Group," Box 530, UCLA Synanon.

because their habit was starting to cost too much money and they wanted to "dry out" for a while before going back to using.[42]

Second, Synanon people were an ever-changing mixture of newcomers and more senior members, as people arrived and left frequently. Seniority existed in a relative sense; while a six-month member was a newcomer in the eyes of a three-year resident, they might act as a mentor for someone who had just come in the door. The longer a person stayed in Synanon, the likelier they were to stay even longer. A newcomer's first days were the most febrile; twenty-seven percent left during their first week and another nineteen percent left within the first month. But However, fifty-nine percent of people who passed the three-month mark, and seventy-six percent of those who passed the six-month mark, were still living there a year later.[43] As of 1965, thirty-five Synanon people had been living there for five years, including Dederich, Charlie Hamer, Reid Kimball, and Betty Beckham.[44] Out of the 1,180 people who had moved into Synanon since 1959, forty percent (463 people) still lived in or were in close contact with the club at the end of 1964.[45] (Synanon often contrasted this figure with the functionally zero rate of "cure" that institutions like Lexington and Camarillo had.) of time often did so because they felt confident in their sobriety.

Third, Synanon was an eclectic group with people from different races, ethnicities, sexes, religions, ages, and classes living together. Synanon people considered themselves, in Dederich's

[42] John Tynan, "Hope for the Addicted: The story of the Synanon foundation," *Downbeat*, February 2, 1961, Box 123, UCLA Synanon.
[43] "Synanon Members as of 11/1/64," Folder "CED: Statistics," Box 530, UCLA Synanon.
[44] "Five Year Group," Folder "CED: Statistics," Box 530, UCLA Synanon.
[45] "Synanon Members as of 11/1/64," Folder "CED: Statistics," Box 530, UCLA Synanon. By 1963, Synanon opened houses in San Diego; Reno, Nevada; and Westport, Connecticut. By far the largest house was still Santa Monica, the focus of this chapter.

words, an "integrated family," which, to them, had multiple meanings.[46] They used it specifically in relation to Black and white people living together, especially as a rebuke of the campaign waged by outraged neighbors and city officials to evict them from the armory, a battle that will be covered in Chapter Four. Synanon people, both Black and white, spoke often about the unusual and powerful experience of sharing space, intimacy, and decision-making with each other. Governance was shared by white and Black members. The only addict member of Synanon's first Board of Directors was a Black man, Jesse Pratt, and by 1962, two Black women, Betty Beckham and Gertrude Davis, were Directors.[47] Black members also opened and ran Synanon houses in other cities and spearheaded Synanon's prison programs in California and Nevada.[48] Interracial friendships were commonplace, as was interracial dating, starting with Dederich and Beckham's relationship, which began in 1960.[49] (The pair got married three years later.[50]) Synanon's racial makeup was a radical break from the segregationist impulses and policies of postwar Los Angeles, but, at the same time, it was still unequally divided, with many more white members than people of color. In 1962, there were sixteen Black members to seventy-one white ones. A 1964 internal report also found that, out of the 1,180 people who had lived in Synanon during its first five years, seventy-seven percent were Caucasian, twelve percent were Black, nine percent were Mexican, and two percent were Puerto Rican.[51] (The community was also predominantly male. From 1959 to 1965, men outnumbered women three to

[46] "U.S. Senate Press Release, Sen. Dodd's comments on Synanon, Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, Sept 6, 1962," Report of Assembly Interim Committee on Criminal Procedure, January 1963, Box 121, UCLA Synanon.
[47] The other Directors, only at the very beginning of Synanon, were members of Dederich and Thompson's spin-off AA group.
[48] This dissertation will not cover these projects in depth, but they are well-deserving of study.
[49] "I'm Betty D" scrapbook, author's personal collection. A note in the book says that October 1960, when Beckham went to the hospital for surgery, was a "turning point" in the pair's relationship, as they went from colleagues and friends to lovers.
[50] Wedding certificate of Betty and Chuck, November 1963, "I'm Betty D" scrapbook, author's personal collection.
[51] "Synanon Members as of 11/1/64," Folder "CED: Statistics," Box 530, UCLA Synanon.

one in the house.[52]) At the same time, Synanon people often spoke about integration as encompassing many kinds of difference, of which race was one. Muslims and Mormons mingled with Jews and Baptists; Irish and Greek New Yorkers lived alongside Mexican Angelenos; college-educated members worked in the same crews as people who had dropped out of seventh grade; twenty-somethings gave advice to fifty-year olds in the synanons and vice versa. These differences were celebrated, and parts of each other's cultures were shared. Zev Putterman showed his housemates how to hold a Passover Seder meal, while Beckham started a class on African-inspired dance, which likely took inspiration from the Black history she had learned in the Nation of Islam.

In the midst of difference and flux in the house, Synanon members forged solidarity around a shared experience that they imagined could supersede everything else: they were, or had been, "dope fiends." An epithet in mainstream society, the term represented something else in Synanon; it was a marker of their essential commonality and collective purpose. In Synanon, a sixty-one-year-old Protestant man who first smoked opium with his Chinese school friends in a 1910s Oklahoma boom town was, in some fundamental sense, cut from the same cloth as a twenty-eight-year-old Jewish woman who had first injected heroin with Merchant Marines at the dawn of the atomic age.[53] It indicated a special type of knowledge about addiction that "squares"—which included medical professionals and law enforcement officials—did not possess and gave them authority over the act of "getting clean," Synanon people' preferred term for sobriety. Most importantly, it qualified one for entry into Synanon House, where being a dope fiend was what made a person belong instead of the stigma that ostracized them from others.

[52] "Synanon Record," in Casriel, *So Fair a House,* 185.
[53] See the oral histories of Charlies Hamer and Arline Hepner, *Seven Voices of Synanon.*

Synanon members strengthened ties to one another in everyday life, as the group participated in a close-knit, interdependent household that provided for one another materially and emotionally. Their days started around eight a.m. when the entire house gathered for breakfast and morning meetings where residents would recite Synanon's Philosophy and Prayer and go over house affairs. According to Joyce Lauricella, who entered Synanon House in 1962, meetings were the time to arrange "our brothers' and sisters' appointments (doctor or dentist)" and "bring up any important issues, like for instance, leaving too much coffee in your cup to be thrown [away] or just plain old forgetting to put the cap on the tooth paste. We are one family here… This is our home now and we must all be careful to take care of it."[54] Taking care of the house continued after the meeting, when everyone worked from about nine to eleven forty-five a.m. Some residents worked in individual jobs on a rotating basis: barber, librarian, or the person in charge of checking out beach items to other residents.[55] Most worked in "crews" with specific responsibilities. Lauricella was on the Cleaning Crew, so she dusted, ironed, and made beds. Other crews included Maintenance, Administrative, Kitchen, and Hustling, which had grown out of the storefront's ragtag "hustle group gang" into a larger-scale operation.[56] By the time Lauricella arrived in Synanon, the Hustling Crew had a couple of pick-up trucks to move donated goods and Synanon business cards to show potential donors. "The guys drive up to a store or plant, go in, and introduce themselves," Lauricella explained, "and run down what we are trying to do here, how we have no definite financial support, and how we would be willing to do services for them, for exchange of goods" that "we need to live by." In general, "the people

[54] Letter from Joyce Lauricella to Mom and Dad, November 20, 1962, Box 172, UCLA Synanon
[55] "Synanon at 1351," circa 1962, digitized film, available in reading room upon request, UCLA Synanon. Viewed on March 22, 2023.
[56] Like they did with the term "dope fiend," Synanon's use of the word "hustler" was another example of how Synanon people did not shy away from the terms of their past, but incorporated them into their community with new connotations.

are moved, and they are mostly warm and generous." [57] Before leaving, the hustlers would invite new donors to their Saturday night parties. These initial connections often led to long-term relationships between Synanon and local businesses, which started to donate meat, eggs, and other items on a weekly or monthly basis.[58]

Synanon people saw a connection between their daily labor and the sustenance of Synanon House as a collective enterprise. Lauricella described how work engendered a sense of pride and purpose because she knew, as did her fellow residents, that it was genuinely vital to the household's functioning. "All of us, when we come in the door here at the beginning," she explained, "don't believe we can do a damn thing…. And then, all of a sudden, boom, we make it and really create or accomplish something. Boy oh boy, do we sleep good that night."[59] Beckham, who worked in the kitchen, "took tremendous pride" in thinking up "short-cuts" that transformed random ingredients obtained by hustlers into something delicious to feed her housemates. Once when they got carrots and soup bones, Beckham made "slumgullion" using her memory of a family recipe.[60] Dederich contrasted work in Synanon with the type of labor done in state-run halfway houses, where staff would "[leave] a broken window… so that the guys could all fix it." He argued that such attempts to instill a facility's occupants with "a feeling of belonging" were doomed to fail because they were artificial; the job was not necessary and the place was not their own. On the contrary, Synanon residents used rooms and furniture every day that "did not exist" before their housemates built them.[61] The tasks they completed were essential to their own survival; if they did not hustle supplies and cook food, then nobody else was going

[57] Letter from Joyce Lauricella to Mom and Dad, December 8, 1962, Box 172, UCLA Synanon
[58] "Synanon Foundation, Inc. Cash Disbursement and Receipts Ledger FYE 8/31/60," Box 67, UCLA Synanon
[59] Letter from Joyce Lauricella to Mom and Dad, December 8, 1962, Box 172, UCLA Synanon
[60] "Joanna Lee Interview #1 – Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon
[61] "Transcript: 621130 – CED Addresses UCLA Group at Synanon," Box 225, UCLA Synanon.

to. Moreover, in the process of using their minds and bodies to keep their community alive, they honed skills that had lain dormant before. In that context, work could feel fulfilling and creative.



Figure 12: Kitchen crew, circa 1961. Betty Beckham is third from the left.

Synanon's finances also fulfilled the collective needs of the household. All funds went into a communal pot. Those monies came primarily from donations by outside individuals, businesses, civic clubs, and churches. Synanon residents paid a one-time admission fee based on what they could afford at the time of entry. There was no monthly residence fee. The residents who worked within Synanon did not collect a paycheck and were not expected to contribute money to the house. Those who worked outside of Synanon—an option available to residents who had been there for at least one year—gave their paychecks to the communal pot. The amounts given by outside sources were typically the largest: "Jake Ross, $500;" "Mt. Hollywood

Church, $75;" "Lewis Erwin & Assoc., $250;" "Paramount Kiwonis [sic] Club, $25." They were also often clustered on Saturdays, when visitors came to Synanon for the weekly party. Synanon residents typically gave in lower and more sporadic amounts: "Jim Middleton, $5.96;" "Jimmy [the] 'Greek,' $6;" "Lena Lindsay, $10;" "Wilbur Beckham, $7.73." There were some exceptional cases, like that of Joe Pass, a successful jazz guitarist. In 1960, he contributed regular amounts of $37.50 to the pot.[62] Funds raised from group endeavors were given back to the house, as well. When Synanon musicians recorded an album in 1962, their proceeds showed up in the house ledger three times: "Synanon Band, $350.72" in April, $181 in June, and $300 in December.[63]

Regardless of how much an individual housemate gave (or did not give) to the communal pot, Synanon people allocated their money according to the specific needs of every individual and the household overall. Nobody—not Dederich nor any board member—took a salary. The bulk of the money went towards household expenses and goods that everyone enjoyed: rent, groceries, cigarettes, transportation, utilities, laundry, and a newspaper subscription to the *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*.[64] Other funds were allocated to residents. Every member who had lived in Synanon for more than six months received weekly Walking Around Money, or WAM. In November 1962, Joyce Lauricella got two dollars in WAM, which she liked to spend at the movie theater.[65] Communal funds also paid for the needs of a specific resident or group of residents. In February 1960, Synanon paid for "Dentist for Phil Hunt," "Clinic for Herman Gayer," and a haircut for another member. In May, $3.06 went towards an "expense for Hustling

[62] "Synanon Foundation, Inc. Cash Disbursements and Receipts Ledger FYE 8/31/61," Box 67, UCLA Synanon. For Joe Pass's entry date of December 18, 1960: "Five Year Group," *Synanon Foundation, Inc. Santa Monica, California Population Statistics, as of November 27, 1967,* Box 530, UCLA Synanon.
[63] "Synanon Foundation, Inc. Cash Disbursements & Receipts 12/61 – 10/62," Box 67, UCLA Synanon
[64] "Synanon Foundation, Inc. Cash Disbursement and Receipts Ledger FYE 8/31/60," Box 67, UCLA Synanon.
[65] Letter from Joyce Lauricella to Mom and Dad, November 20, 1962, Box 172, UCLA Synanon

crew," and in July, $1.04 covered the costs of "2 Reeds for clarinet." When residents needed money for legal expenses, that came out of the communal pot. In 1960, Synanon paid for one resident's monthly twenty-dollar "probation payments," as well as filing fees to help members with suspended licenses regain their driving privileges. The household also paid the "Bar association fees" of Vince Cavanaugh, a resident since 1959.[66] According to Dederich, Cavanaugh had once been a "gangster lawyer," but had lost his practice when he became addicted to heroin.[67] After his fees to the California Bar Association were paid, Cavanaugh became Synanon's in-house lawyer, representing residents and the organization in court.

Synanon people experimented with a social form in between the nuclear family and the larger society, creating what Dederich called "a modern tribe." [68] Synanon took on functions that most Americans would have expected to come from sources outside of the home—employment, legal advocacy, even a form of banking (as well as education and leisure activities, which will be covered later in this chapter). At the same time, Synanon House cultivated a variety of intimate relationships and family units that served as constituent parts of the whole. They were "extending the sharing of experience from a man, woman, and three or four children," Dederich asserted, "to the idea of quite a number of men and women and children all whirling around in a crucible" where "the immediate family [was] of secondary importance to the tribe."[69] Dederich was a chief patriarch of sorts. Synanon people called him "the old man" and saw him as a leader, teacher, and father figure, while Dederich often referred to residents as "kids." Residents coupled up and got married within Synanon—with Dederich walking at least one woman down the aisle in a

[66] "Synanon Foundation, Inc. Cash Disbursement and Receipts Ledger FYE 8/31/60," Box 67, UCLA Synanon. For Vince Cavanaugh's entry date of August 5, 1959: "Five Year Group," *Synanon Foundation, Inc. Santa Monica, California Population Statistics, as of November 27, 1967,* Box 530, UCLA Synanon.
[67] "Transcript: 630130 – "Nation" Article," Box 226, UCLA Synanon.
[68] "Transcript: 651005 – SFVSC Lecture #2, "Adults Have More Fun Than Children," Box 229, UCLA Synanon.
[69] Ibid.

Synanon wedding. Starting in 1960, a number of Synanon women moved their children into the house, as well.[70] Some used Synanon's legal services to remove their kids from foster care.[71] By 1961, ten children lived in Synanon, along with approximately 110 adults, and Synanon had rented an apartment next to the armory to house the "Nursery."[72] The work of child-rearing still predominantly fell to female residents, though they raised children collectively so that mothers were not excluded from the action in the main house.[73] Within two years of Synanon's existence, it had made room in their commune for a wide range of intimate relationships conventionally carried out within the nuclear household: parents and children, siblings, husbands and wives.



Figure 13: Christmas at Synanon, December 1960.

[70] Lena Lindsay was the first to bring in her two kids, who had been living with her mother. Lena Lindsay. Interview by author, Los Angeles, August 27, 2019.
[71] "621011 Counsel Session," Box 224, UCLA Synanon; "The School: An Overview," September 1966, Al Bauman, Box 35, UCLA Synanon.
[72] Lena Lindsay. Interview by author, Los Angeles, August 27, 2019; *Report of Assembly Interim Committee on Criminal Procedure*, Assembly Interim Committee, Vol 22, No 3, 1961-63, January 1963 – in Box 121, UCLA Synanon.
[73] Margo McCartney. Zoom interview by author, March 22, 2021. The bulk of the clerical work went to Synanon women, too, according to McCartney.



Figure 14: Synanon kids singing, circa 1960.

Sobriety, Synanon-Style

It was within the context of intimate communal life that Synanon people participated in practices geared towards helping them get clean. They reimagined "treatment," insofar as they would have experienced it in medical facilities, as something that could also forge solidarity between individual members and aid in governing their community. This started from the beginning, when a newcomer arrived at Synanon House and started withdrawing from drugs. As Chapter 1 discussed, the physiological act of withdrawal was perhaps the one aspect of addiction that medical professionals were confident they could achieve. Clinicians contrasted the medical approach to withdrawal—in which pharmaceutical drugs were administered to numb the pain of detoxification—to the harshness of "cold turkey" withdrawal in jail, where drug users detoxed in segregated cells without medication. In Synanon, residents also kicked heroin "cold turkey," but they reported that it was not like the painful experience of carceral withdrawal. When a newcomer arrived, a rotating group of Synanon residents—called the "Owl Watch"—kept an eye

on them twenty-four hours a day. In the absence of drugs, Owl Watchers gave them "rubdowns" to soothe their muscle aches and prepared eggnogs to calm their stomachs. For Charlie Hamer, they "gave [him] bed baths and wiped [his] puke up."[74] Reid Kimball remembered them building a steam tent out of towels and sheets to clear his clogged nasal passages.[75]

Synanon's approach to withdrawal was an implicit challenge to the prevailing wisdom that addicts in withdrawal were crazed and dangerous. At first, when Synanon was just a club in a old storefront on the Ocean Park boardwalk, kicking cold turkey was a practical necessity. They did not have access to pharmaceutical drugs nor did they trust themselves around them—so they kicked without them, and supplied other types of aid. In the process, Synanon people found that unmedicated withdrawal was a different experience when done in the context of community rather than institutional isolation. Kicking cold turkey became part of Synanon's alternative philosophy of addiction and sobriety, as housemates kept withdrawal in the middle of daily life. Dederich acknowledged that kicking "cold turkey" was "real tough on the floor of the County Jail," but emphasized that "most of what…happens in other environments is alleviated by whatever goes on at Synanon. The spectacle of a lot of people who have done it right in the same place; a casual acceptance of it. Nobody there is afraid of withdrawal; it's just accepted, and, as a consequence, it's a pretty calm thing."[76] Newcomers lay on the couches, with a bucket for vomit, in the middle of the living room. Whenever they felt up to it, they could sunbathe or dip their feet in the ocean, and even attend Saturday Night Parties.

[74] Yablonsky, *Tunnel Back,* 19
[75]Reid Kimball, *Seven Voices of Synanon,* 24.
[76] "Charles Dederich," *Seven Voices of Synanon*, 75.

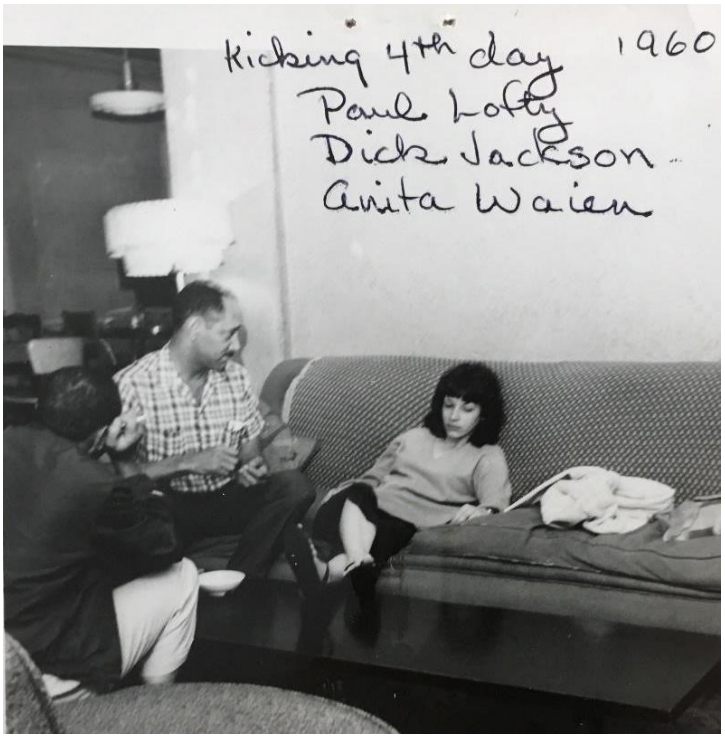


Figure 15: Newcomer, on couch, going through withdrawal alongside two Owl Watchers, 1960.

The experience of withdrawal was also a bonding moment for newcomers and Synanon people as fellow "dope fiends." They had experienced the physical pain of kicking drugs and knew how fierce a newcomer's impulse to resist sobriety could be. During Joyce Lauricella's first days in the house, she "walked around madder than hell," but found that her housemates "wouldn't leave me alone. They cared, they spoke to me, and tried to pull me out of my self made bag" of "feeling sorry for yourself."[77] When Zev Putterman moved into Synanon in 1962, he was deeply skeptical. He had been to a host of sanitaria and state hospitals, but nothing stuck. When he walked into the living room for the first time, he could not believe his eyes. He had told himself that he would be the biggest "dope fiend" in the place, impossible to cure—but there, right in front of him, were "men and women with scars up and down their arms," walking around the living room, chatting with each other—friendly, calm, and sober. As he kicked, he looked for

[77] Letter from Joyce to Mom & Dad, November 20, 1962, UCLA Synanon.

weak spots. He "exaggerate[d] [his] symptoms," like he did in the hospitals, and wondered if somebody might slip him some pills. Instead, Kandy Latson approached him and asked, "'Little brother, when are you going to get sick?'"[78] In that "simple little intuitive" move, Putterman recalled, "[Latson] let me know that he knew that I knew that he knew" what Putterman was doing. Latson "didn't give me sympathy… he didn't give me any kind of 'understanding'—and yet he gave me understanding on a very deep level." It was as if the other residents were "a million manifestations of *me*," he explained. "[K]andy's different. He's colored. Yet [K]andy can spot things in me so quickly that are exactly me… He knows when I'm conning, when I'm lying to myself. I can't do this when he's around, because he sees himself in me, too." Putterman's quick, deep sense of connection to Latson, who had been sober for two years at that point, gave him hope. As he lay on the living room couch, kicking heroin for the umpteenth time, Putterman felt that his housemates "knew something that [he] didn't know." He quickly "became quite curious about what *is* it" that Synanon might impart to him if he stayed.[79]

Upon staying, one of the first things that Putterman would have experienced next was the small-s synanon, a practice so fundamental to the group that it bore the same name. Though it shared features with group therapy, and was even occasionally referred to as such by Synanon people, the small-s synanon should not be understood primarily as a therapeutic technique, but a social ritual that fostered solidarity between Synanon people and governed communal life in the house. In fact, Synanon people differentiated the synanon from the group therapy in which they had participated while institutionalized and incarcerated. Group sessions were "all a big joke to us," Reid Kimball recalled. "We put [the psychiatrists] on with some horrible tales, something

[78] Yablonsky spelled Latson's first name with a "C," but in the Reveal podcast, "American Rehab," Latson made clear that it was spelled with a "K." *American Rehab,* episode 2, "Miracle on the Beach," aired July 2020, https://revealnews.org/podcast/american-rehab-chapter-two-miracle-on-the-beach/.
[79] Yablonsky, *The Tunnel Back,* 276-277; 281.

they wanted to hear, to titillate them," certain that they would not be able to tell the difference between fact and fiction or a real emotional breakthrough and a counterfeit one.[80] Inside the institution, group therapy was something of a game to be won. Addict cases believed that they knew what clinicians wanted to hear: "horrible tales" of hitting rock bottom on the streets followed by epiphanies supposedly triggered by professional treatment. They also understood that performing well in these sessions would dictate whether they would be deemed cured and released, which undermined whatever therapeutic power they might have possessed. To Synanon people, the synanon was a fundamentally different type of endeavor.

If Kimball and others believed that the institutional therapeutic encounter incentivized falsity, they were surprised to observe honest and reciprocal exchange in the small-s synanon. When he first moved in, Kimball was "convinced" that synanons would be "of no consequence and nothing to do with anything," like his past experiences had been. However, he found that synanons created "a climate where you can pour something out that you really want to pour out, and have people be honest with you and point out some things that you are reluctant to hear but somehow you must hear—you're desperate to hear [because] you know that what you're doing isn't getting [you] anywhere." Just as Zev Putterman experienced with Kandy Latson, Kimball felt like he could not fool his housemates like he had clinicians. Their counsel rang true, and Kimball noticed that he wanted to be known by them, as a result. Whereas his experience of clinical encounters was focused on performing psychological growth to get in the good graces of the professional in charge, Kimball's participation in synanons seemed to open up the possibility of genuine change. A large part of their power came from the fact that Kimball was choosing to be there at all. If he wanted to leave, he could walk out of the door without persuading anyone to

[80] "Transcript: 651130 – SFVSC #8 Saga of Reid Kimball," Box 230, UCLA Synanon.

let him do so. And yet he did not want to; on the contrary, his experience in the synanons was "the thing that put a grab on [him]" to stay. It was a "phenomenon," he explained, "where you felt something was occurring, something that was different, new and intriguing."[81]

The main topics of analysis in small-s synanons centered on conflicts stemming from the everyday communal life. Housemates picked apart each other's issues—whether anger, racial prejudice, selfishness, or misogyny—under the assumption that doing so was essential for sustaining both individual sobriety and the collective welfare. Three nights a week, Synanon people gathered in the living room and waited for their names to be called, along with a corresponding room to go to. Groups of nine to ten residents were assigned to a particular synanon group by the "Synamaster," which was a rotating position. Often the combinations were random. Other times, the Synamaster brought certain people together to address a conflict that they had seen or heard was brewing in the house; one of the people involved could have made that request or a perceptive housemate could have done so. "When everyone is assembled," Joyce Lauricella described, "we all sit very quietly and wait for an opening." An "opening" occurred when one member instigated a confrontation with another. Lauricella described an example of the scene in a November 1962 letter to her parents:

> This is an actual conversation, so dig it:
>
> > Zev [Putterman] asks Joyce why she is smiling or if she is 'extremely happy about something.'
> >
> > Joyce says no. Zev asks what she's not happy about.
> >
> > Joyce says, 'My work, and my inability to get along with some of the girls.' Joyce tried to 'speak to Betty [Beckham] once, but it's no damn good, we just argue and fight and seem to set something off in each other.
> >
> > Zev: What kind of feeling does Betty stir up in you—what does she do that makes you so angry?
> >
> > Joyce: She'll stand over me and tell me what to do, and it makes me running mad… I just don't dig her attitude. She doesn't know how to talk to people.

[81] "Transcript: 651130 – SFVSC #8 Saga of Reid Kimball," Box 230, UCLA Synanon.

> Zev: And I suppose you, you're an expert at talking to people? And I also suppose that in your mind Betty has no reason for wanting to blow at you right now—and that she's angrier than hell, isn't that right, Betty?
>
> Betty: You bet your life it is. This here clown is the nastiest person in here, and is just a lazy broad.
>
> Joyce: You got some nerve—who the hell do you think you're talking to?
>
> Betty: You, you funny looking bitch.
>
> Joyce: Why, you arrogant bastard—go drop dead![82]

This synanon, like others, was fast-paced, aggressive, and raw, but also strategic. Beckham and Putterman, both more senior residents, seemed to seemed to partner in provoking Lauricella, a newcomer who had moved in about a month prior.[83] Newcomers attended synanons from the moment they arrived, but did not have to participate right away. They were given time to observe and get acquainted with the process. After a time, though, other residents would start to draw them into conflict. In this case, Putterman kicked off the synanon by needling Lauricella for "smiling," which he implied was a front intended to make the group believe that she was "extremely happy." Within moments, he had prodded her to complain about not "get[ting] along" with Beckham, who perhaps had been placed in the synanon purposefully. As a result of his prodding, Lauricella criticized Beckham for not "know[ing] how to talk to people." Putterman quickly flipped the script by challenging Lauricella's interpretation of her encounter with Beckham ("And I suppose you, you're an expert at talking to people?") and then directly bringing Beckham into the conversation ("I suppose…that she's angrier than hell, isn't that right, Betty?"). Beckham seemed to take Putterman's cue, immediately escalating the conflict by insulting Lauricella. This instigated "such a terrible yelling session," Lauricella wrote, "that [she] had a sore throat the next day."[84]

---

[82] Letter from Joyce to Mom & Dad, November 20, 1962, Box 172, UCLA Synanon.
[83] Joyce Lauricella's Beginning Data Sheet, Box 172, UCLA Synanon.
[84] Letter from Joyce to Mom & Dad, November 20, 1962, Box 172, UCLA Synanon.



Figure 16: A small-s synanon in action, 1960.

Such antagonism was an essential part of the synanon's underlying philosophy, which held that addicts harbored pent-up rage that perpetuated their addiction. However, Synanon people did not ascribe to the mid-twentieth-century stereotype that addicts relished social deviance. They believed instead that addicts felt all too acutely the pain of having been cast out of the realm of the respectable citizen, worker, neighbor, and family member. Dederich often emphasized that addicts were all too *like* ordinary Americans; they too coveted the latest "wardrobe or the little red Chevrolet roadster" or any marker of "position [and] status." They wanted desperately to belong, to be loved, to be successful and recognized as such—and they were haunted by their failure to have such things. Whenever they "tried somehow to go after the things [they] wanted," Dederich argued, they ended up "in a tank of some kind," whether jail cell or hospital room. However their drug use began, it had become a way to numb the pain of ostracism and disappointed dreams, even as it simultaneously pushed them further down the social hierarchy. "We go through life in a state of terror all the time," Dederich argued. "We rationalize it into

resentment or rebellion"—the posture of the "cool cat" or the "tough broad" who could not care less about "square" values—but that façade hid "the feeling buried deep in our gut… of unworthiness, of inadequacy."[85]

Small-s synanons were the place to release those feelings and be free of their crushing weight. Residents believed in the value of expulsion so much that they tried hard to trigger each other's anger, which they saw as a cover for grief, fear, and loneliness. In synanons, they worked "to pop that poison out… [and] drain some of it out," one resident explained, in the hopes of instigating catharsis.[86] (Synanon's cardinal house rule forbidding physical violence and the threat thereof was crucial here, for residents could trust that verbal altercations would not escalate to physical ones.) Dederich compared anger to irrepressible natural forces—water, excrement—that pushed relentlessly towards release; better to let the boundary give way than to spend life in a fruitless quest to hold it in. "In synanons, blow off, really blow off," Dederich advised. "Take out your hostility and everything else… Let the steam off and the let the gas out."[87] He compared synanons to "emotional bathrooms" where "the gang will…nudge you a little bit, try to hurt your feelings, to stir you up so that you can get this crap out" and "yell and throw your garbage all over the floor."[88] The content of synanons—i.e., the specifics of Lauricella's problem with Beckham—did not matter as much as the participants' visceral experience of release. A person did not have to pick through their "crap" to feel unburdened; they just had to get it out. The publicness of expulsion was an essential part of the process, too. The insults and accusations in small-s synanons reinforced the principle that no matter how rotten a person's "garbage" might

[85] "Transcript: 621010 Getting Acquainted, Santa Monica," Box 224, UCLA Synanon
[86] *American Rehab,* episode 2, "Miracle on the Beach," aired July 2020, https://revealnews.org/podcast/american-rehab-chapter-two-miracle-on-the-beach/.
[87] "Transcript: 620403 The Self and the Not Self," Box 224, UCLA Synanon.
[88] "Transcript: 621010 Getting Acquainted, Santa Monica," Box 224, UCLA Synanon.

seem to them, they would still be embraced by the group after throwing it "all over the floor." For many residents, synanons were living proof that the features of their existence which felt inescapable—the ostracism, supposed incurability, and shame—were perhaps as ephemeral as "steam."

Synanon people believed that, over time, their embrace of each other no matter what had been exposed in synanons would dissolve personal self-loathing and shame while also creating an honest, compassionate community. As such, synanons helped govern communal life. Once Lauricella's synanon ended, she "began to think about the conversation and started to dig where I was goofing and being an arrogant spoiled child." The self-reflection went both ways, too. Lauricella felt that Beckham understood that she also "[had] things to correct" in improving their relationship. The insults they hurled at each other were easily forgotten, for they were simply expressions of the "crap" already inside them. "Sometimes you identify with someone else or they remind you of someone and a whole lot of baloney can happen behind it," Lauricella explained. "That's why we have synanons, to blow and let off steam. To grow." This realization may have occurred at the afterparty held after every synanon. Even if residents were still upset, they all gathered in the living room to talk, drink coffee and smoke cigarettes, and dance to the hi-fi. The ritual drove the central point home: their "garbage"—their conflicts, secrets, and shames—was not bigger than what they had in common, nor did they exclude anyone from belonging in the house. For Lauricella, the experience of exposure and embrace was exhilarating. "There are no secrets," Lauricella wrote. "We share everything with each other." It gave her "goosebumps" just thinking about it. She also started to notice an internal shift in how she felt about herself. For "2 or 3 hours," Lauricella wrote, "I can actually live with myself and not think

I'm ugly or some kind of misfit… Something you learn is that if you feel like hell, it never gets quite as bad anymore, and the hell lessens, a little."[89]

Large-scale social ills like racial prejudice were also discussed in synanons, testing the strength of the dope fiend bond on which Synanon House rested. In these cases especially, synanons acted as a form of communal governance as residents petitioned one another for redress and wrestled with how to forge a harmonious integrated community. Since Synanon was composed of people from a segregated and racist United States, residents turned to the small-s synanon as the mechanism by which hostility could turn into understanding and peace. As an example, racism dominated conversations over the course of a week in May 1963 after tensions boiled over when a white resident used the n-word in a synanon.[90] (It is unclear whether they directed the slur directly at a Black resident or not.) Wilbur Beckham, a Black Synanite and Betty Beckham's brother, responded to the epithet by "[going] around the room and [saying] fuck you to every white face." In moments like these, whiteness and Blackness became the most salient markers of identity instead of one's status as addict getting clean. Two nights later in the next synanon, another Black Synanite named John Peterson brought up the incident as a way to address racial prejudice in the house more broadly. Peterson opened the synanon by calling out a white Jewish resident named Don. "This sucker right here," Peterson began, "…goes around the house all day spewing his prejudice shit out of his mouth all the time." Two white residents confirmed Peterson's "indictment" and said they had noticed Don "always…dropping his prejudice around the building" and using racial slurs.

---

[89] Letter from Joyce Lauricella to Mom & Dad, November 20, 1962, Folder "Joyce Lauricella," Box 172, UCLA Synanon.

[90] The transcript of this synanon does not have a date, but I am giving it a date of May 1963 due to Peterson's comments about the "suckers down in Birmingham last week," referring to the infamous civil rights demonstration in Birmingham, Alabama, where Birmingham police officers used dogs, fire hoses, and clubs against the protesters.

Things got heated as Don refused to admit to his actions and tried to shift focus to Beckham, both of which went against the logic of the small-s synanon. What followed Don's deflection was an intense discussion of both Don's racism and, more importantly, the harm done by his refusal to abide by the spirit of the small-s synanon and Synanon House as a collective:

> **Don**: Hey, listen, I don't want to scream in a synanon. Wilbur has a bigger prejudice problem than I do.
>
> **Beckham**: No, look, I get mine out in synanon. No one can tell you that they hear me around the floor talking the shit that I talk in synanon. I talk about my prejudice in synanons, and I'm talking to a mother-fuckin' white face like you. You see, I call you a mother-fucker, but I do it in synanons.
>
> **Don**: So, what does that prove?
>
> **Beckham**: That proves you ain't got no goddamn guts.
>
> **Nancy**: Don, you can do the right thing in here by spewing your prejudice garbage in a synanon, where more people can look at it with you. Get it out here and now. Then maybe you won't be spreading it all over the house.
>
> **Peterson:** You gutless mother-fucker, you won't call [Wilbur] anything to his face. You'd rather go behind his back and call him something… You fat, ignorant slob. That's exactly what you are. You don't have any guts, man—not a gut in your whole fuckin' body… I could probably get up and spit in your face right now and all you'd do is wipe it off.[91]
>
> **Don**: Go ahead and try it…
>
> **Peterson**: What do you think of me right now?
>
> **Don**: What am I suppose to do, get mad at you, man?
>
> **Peterson**: I'm mad at your crazy ass right now. You know what you are to me right now? …You're exactly like them suckers down in Birmingham last week that turned dogs loose on people to do what they couldn't do. That's exactly what you are to me right now. You're like that prejudiced mother-fucker, Governor ———.[92]
>
> **Don**: That's good. That means you respect me. You're afraid of me.
>
> **Peterson**: Yeah, I respect you all right.[93]

Beckham and Peterson's critique of Don was not that he was racist, necessarily, but that he refused to "get [his prejudice] out in a synanon." Nancy, a white resident, also criticized Don for "spreading [his] prejudice all over the house" instead of "spewing" it in the synanon, "where more people [could] look at it with [him]." Don not "blowing off" in a synanon meant that he

---

[91] In Yablonsky's book, he noted here that Synanon's core rule of no physical violence or threat of physical violence was tested here. But it passed, Yablonsky suggests, precisely because of the residents' trust in that rule, that Peterson was only speaking rhetorically and for a purpose other than an actual threat. Yablonsky, *Tunnel Back,* 145.

[92] The last name was redacted from the transcript, but it seems clear that Peterson was referring to Alabama Governor George Wallace.

[93] Yablonsky, *Tunnel Back,* 145.

was not open to change, which affected his housemates as much as it did him. According to Peterson, Don's attempts to save face in synanons was worse than cowardly, it was actively harmful to the welfare of Synanon House, which was trying to figure out an alternative to the racist violence of mainstream America. Like Bull Connor and the other "suckers down in Birmingham" siccing dogs on civil rights activists, Don wanted to maintain his prejudice while keeping some distance from its bloody consequences. At the same time, the fact that Don was prejudiced was not the fundamental problem for Peterson; the issue was his rejection of the group's efforts to help him acknowledge and get rid of it. Fully participating in synanons—which meant, perhaps paradoxically, giving voice to hate and fury—was a sign that the person was willing to hold themselves up to collective examination and surrender their racist "garbage" once and for all.

The harshness of synanons coexisted with compassion and understanding. The goal was not to "join in a rat pack," Synanon-speak for ganging up on someone, just for the sake of it, but to trigger self-reflection, which they believed did not often come easy.[94] In Don's case, Beckham and Peterson went after his masculinity—he was "gutless," someone who would cower from confrontation even if spat upon. Peterson especially took on the role of provocateur, taunting and harassing Don, trying to get him to "blow." Even then, Peterson left doors open for Don. He interrupted his own attack and gave Don a chance to talk back ("What do you think of me right now?"). Then he stopped his attack completely when Don said it was "good" that Peterson put him in the same boat as violent segregationists because it meant Don had "respect." Peterson was sarcastic ("Yeah, I respect you all right"), then quiet. His offensive had jostled something raw out of Don: his desire to be respected. The synanon's dynamic shifted as the participants took note of

[94] Transcript: 650610 – Operation By-Pass 11, Box 229, UCLA Synanon.

the admission. A white resident asked, "Do you think anybody in here respects you, Don? Forget about prejudice—do you think anybody in here respects you?" "No," Don replied. "I'm in a world of my own." He described feeling anxiety about white men in Synanon "[going] to the other extreme" in acting so comfortable with integrated living, which was hard for him to accept. Once Don had admitted his prejudice, Beckham extended him an olive branch:

> It's all right for you if you have to feel this way, Don… What I'm indicting you for is taking these feelings out every day in the building and spreading all this goddamn garbage and hate into our house. Dump that prejudice garbage here in a synanon, where you can get some help and change, and maybe you'll understand it better, and maybe I will, too. Let's use the synanon to handle these vicious prejudice feelings. Maybe we can work the problem out here together.[95]

Within minutes, Beckham had gone from telling Don that he had "no goddamn guts" to saying it was "all right" if Don "[had] to feel this way," as long as he agreed to "dump" his "prejudice garbage" in the synanon, where housemates could "work the problem out…together." The initial conflict was necessary both to maintain the integrity of Synanon's community, which could not absorb Don's "garbage and hate" in everyday life, and to push Don to "get some help and change" with the guidance and support of his housemates. To Synanon people, intense confrontation was the only thing that opened up the possibility of genuine intimacy and community.

Small-s synanons expressed a core tenet of Synanon: the conviction that human beings were capable of radical change. They were living proof that the burdens that weighed them down, and the shame they carried, were not their forever fate. In an era where drug addicts were typically seen as doomed and incurable, synanons conveyed the message that that nothing they had done in the past would stain them permanently, or would make them undeserving of a place

[95] Yablonsky, *Tunnel Back,* 145.

in Synanon. They would find that when they let those things out into the open, their housemates were still be there, quick to embrace them.

The goals of self-realization, social harmony, and sobriety were intertwined in Synanon, which operated on the premise that an individual's well-being was inseparable from the general welfare of the group. Participants in synanons were housemates, friends, colleagues, and lovers. They lived together so closely that interpersonal grievances had to be aired, and accountability had to be demanded, in order for the group to survive. The process was often confrontational, but Synanon people believed that such conflict was not only necessary, but not nearly as lasting as the individual transformation and collectivity that came afterwards. Drug addiction, like racism, were not problems of the individual psyche, but of the social context in which they existed. The way forward, Synanon people thought, was to create new a new context, new social conditions, a new way of living altogether.

"The Search is the Fun": Sobriety and Self-Realization

In a profound sense, not using drugs was the bare minimum of what Synanon people wanted to do. The real fun was to be had in everything that came afterwards: learning, creating, playing, experimenting, and communing with each other. Nearly a decade before the 1960s and 1970s counterculture made self-actualization its mantra, Synanon was building a world around exploring and fulfilling their own creative potential as individuals and as a collective. "The power which resides in him," the Synanon Philosophy affirmed, "is new in nature… As long as he willingly accepts himself, he will continue to grow and develop his potentialities. As long as he does not accept himself, much of his energies will be used to defend rather than to explore and actualize himself."[96] Once Synanon people stopped exerting so much energy trying to suppress

[96] "Synanon Philosophy," copy in author's personal collection.

their rage, grief, and fear—by letting it out in synanons—they would find a surplus of lifeforce inside of them, ready to be enjoyed and put to good use. Addiction was neither "illness" nor "sin," Dederich argued, but a "stupid" way to live, a waste of consciousness in the "wide universe…full of good."[97] Being in Synanon was a chance for "people [to] begin to toss away the blinders and begin to live" in new, vibrant ways.[98]

For Synanon people, getting clean was an existential quest that raised the possibility of leading a nonconformist life eschewing the acquisition of things, status, and security that seemed to undergird the postwar mainstream. Synanon people saw addiction as one of many ways that human beings spent life "running round and round and round" a "squirrel cage," trying to achieve stability to no avail.[99] Where the institutional consensus cast addicts as social deviants, Synanon saw them as people just as desiring of safety and comfort as anyone else. To achieve a sense of security they took illicit drugs; others sought after promotions, the latest Ford model, a house in the suburbs. Both ways, the socially proscribed and prescribed, suffered from the same problem: they conflated the self with external things, and happiness with consumption. "I used to feel," Dederich told Synanon people, "that my automobile was part of myself—the price of it, the kind it was… If anybody would say, 'Gee, that's a lousy automobile. The color stinks, it doesn't go very fast,' I took it as a personal affront. They were criticizing my possessions, which are myself." Whatever someone identified as essential to their sense of self, they "[had] to protect" with all their might. They ended up with more to lose, more to defend, more to fight about. In searching for freedom from fear, they burdened themselves tenfold. Not only was that mindset "a hell of a nuisance," it was also "a silly way to operate," Dederich argued. "You're

[97] "Transcript: 621010 Getting Acquainted, Santa Monica," Box 224, UCLA Synanon; Synanon Philosophy.
[98] "Transcript: 621010 Getting Acquainted, Santa Monica," Box 224, UCLA Synanon.
[99] "Transcript: 620403 The Self and the Not Self," Box 224, UCLA Synanon

carrying a dead world around with you all the time."[100] Similarly, Synanon people believed that addicts used drugs to build a wall of protection around them from shame and pain, only to end up increasingly terrified of what would happen if they stopped using. Getting sober was about far more than quitting drugs. It was a microcosm of the whole dilemma of modern life: how to escape the "squirrel cage," drop the "dead world," and really "begin to live" without "blinders."

The key question for Synanon people was not why they used drugs (which obsessed the medical professionals and state authorities), but who they were, deep down. Dederich's "method of approaching" the issue laid the foundation of Synanon's philosophy and daily life:

> Suppose you think of your self as a kind of oblong blur that is always receding—it's always going away from you, or is always up ahead of you and just beyond reach. There is your self… The self is, of course, an infinite concept and it cannot be understood by the thinking mechanism of a human being… So, we knock ourselves out trying to understand the self. This is very good. Our effort to understand the self brings us more in touch with reality, lets us know [that] 'the more we know, the less we know,' and 'the less we know, the more we know,' and we get into the resolution of the paradox. If you play around with the thought for a while, [you realize that] … the answer to life is not the finding of the self, it's the search for the self, and, possibly, the realization that one can't find the self.… He is only capable of searching—and this is the fun."[101]

The path to staying clean was the same path to self-realization: letting go of the false hope of escapist happiness, whether through intoxication or consumption, and embracing the unpredictable mess of searching, longing, getting lost, and trying to make sense of it all anyway. The problem with postwar thinking was how it dangled the promise of dreams fulfilled: the top rung on the latter, the nest egg, the forever home. Synanon came up with its own common sense: "Stay loose," and "Don't get locked into position." There was no finish line where chaos settled and stability reigned supreme. Looked at one way, such a reality was terrifying, hence all the efforts to vanquish it. Looked at another way, Synanon people thought, it was freeing. It reimagined the lack of ultimate security—or the endless "search for the self"—as something

[100] "Transcript: 620403 The Self and the Not Self," Box 224, UCLA Synanon.
[101] "Transcript: 620403 The Self and the Not Self," Box 224, UCLA Synanon

"fun," something not to fear but to "play around with." It took the pressure off. It allowed a person to just enjoy the ride.

Synanon people applied this way of thinking to daily life in myriad ways. First, they cultivated a vibrant intellectual culture where they "[knocked themselves] out trying to understand the self" through discussion and debate.[102] Every weekday, Synanon people held Noon Seminars, when they gathered in a large room to discuss a "concept" written on a blackboard. The concepts were quotations by Nietzsche, Dante, John Stuart Mill, and others that were, Joyce Lauricella explained, "of course, controversial or valuable for two-sided discussion."[103] There was no right way to interpret a concept. The point was to view it from every angle, listen, think and speak freely, criticize and laud, change one's mind—in sum, to "stay loose," instead of getting "locked into position" by a single set of beliefs. One day's concept came from Albert Camus: "Is it more justice or more love that the world needs? Justice is often the equivalent of vengeance, while love must take on a violent form to achieve the ultimate good." The quote rubbed one resident the wrong way; he asked, indignantly, "'Take a violent form,' what does he mean by this? Does he mean if I was married, to achieve something good between me and my wife, I'd have to beat her once in a while?" Another resident connected Camus's concept to her dawning realization that she had misjudged her parents while using drugs: "With love, we see something violent. Someone tells us what's wrong with us, and we think this is violent anger or hostility… [But] after we're here [in Synanon] awhile and we begin to become aware of ourselves, we see that it was with love that these things were said... You

[102] "Transcript: 620403 The Self and the Not Self," Box 224, UCLA Synanon
[103] Letter from Joyce to Mom & Dad, November 20, 1962, Box 172, UCLA Synanon; Guy Endore, "Synanon: a meaningful new word," informational pamphlet, circa early-mid 1960s, Box 158, UCLA Synanon.

realize that they were trying to help."[104] The topics were heady, but the act of exploring them together, no holds barred, was thrilling. "This is when I really groove," Lauricella wrote. "We really have a bawl with this… I really tear [the concepts] apart and philosophize like mad."[105]

Synanon people philosophized on their own time, too. There was a thrum of intellectual exploration throughout the house, which had an atmosphere akin to a university. People checked out books from the Synanon Library and read them sprawled out on the couch, next to each other. Seminar discussions spilled into late-night conversations and mini-reading groups. (In fact, the concepts for seminars came from residents pulling quotations they liked or thought would make for good debate from the books they were reading.) In their "effort to understand the self," Synanon people read books on psychology, sociology, philosophy, and religion. Many created reading lists for themselves, complete with title and corresponding call number in the Synanon Library. On Jesse Pratt's reading list was "Confucius – K4," "[Carl] Jung's 2 Essays – J6," "Wisdom of LaoTse – L1," "[sociologist David Reisman's] The Lonely Crowd – R6," and "[psychoanalyst Melanie Klein's] Love, Hate and Reparation – K2."[106] Another resident planned to read *The Hostile Mind: The Sources and Consequences of Rage and Hate*, by psychoanalyst Leon Joseph Saul, and *The Psychology of Behavior Disorders: A Biosocial Interpretation*, a psychiatric textbook.[107] Lena Lindsay became an "avid reader" after moving into the house, always in the middle of a couple books, some "philosophical" and some "junk." Before Synanon, she considered herself a person who "had a problem reading," but she learned from Dederich that it could be a pleasurable act, not an obligation. "He said, 'I don't care if it's but for five

[104] "To Slay a White Horse," digitized film, available in reading room upon request, UCLA Synanon. Viewed on March 22, 2023.
[105] Letter from Joyce to Mom & Dad, November 20, 1962, Box 172, UCLA Synanon
[106] Reading list of Jesse Pratt, Box 174, UCLA Synanon
[107] Reading list of Ray Purnell, Box 174, UCLA Synanon

minutes,'" Lindsay recalled, "'When it gets boring to you, put it down. Don't try to read. That's where a lot of people get themselves turned off." [108] Synanon people followed their fancies, reading and diving deep into whatever struck their interest. Margo McCartney started a Buddhism reading group with some likeminded housemates and a Vocabulary group with others. In the latter, they selected a word from one of their readings each day and challenged each other to use it as many times as possible.[109]

Life in Synanon gave members the opportunity to follow and take joy in pursuits of their own making. Synanon did not, Dederich explained, subscribe to the "old Puritan idea that work for work's sake is virtuous… We don't say that a man is virtuous just because he works five, six, seven hours a day… [We've seen how] a man would do a beautiful job on a buffing machine five days a week, and, suddenly, out of a clear blue sky, run out the door and use drugs."[110] When it came to getting clean and searching for the self, there was something unpredictably essential about just living, and enjoying life, in this new framework. Synanon people held jam sessions in the basement, sunbathed, fell in love, played volleyball, and planned parties. Every afternoon, Joyce Lauricella would "sit in the sun (too much) or use the washing machine, or dig the records, or yak with my friends or nap, or go for a walk." She also loved "soaking in the tub and reading," or walking down to the basement where Synanon's musicians played around.[111] If she was lucky, she would catch Bobby Sharp, a songwriter who had written Ray Charles's 1961 hit "Unchain My Heart," sitting at the piano, "composing a tune." She would "sit down behind him and not say anything and just listen. It's so wonderful to be in the middle of all the many creations that go on here in just one day, every day… Men moving, men coordinating, men

[108] Lena Lindsay. Interview by author, Los Angeles, August 27, 2019.
[109] Margo McCartney. Zoom interview by author, March 22, 2021.
[110] "Transcript: 630323 – Book Talk (Near Group Communication)," Box 226, UCLA Synanon.
[111] Letter from Joyce to Mom & Dad, November 20, 1962, Box 172, UCLA Synanon.

functioning."[112] One of those creations was "SynaGras," based on New Orleans' Mardi Gras festival. Lauricella was one of the residents who were "busy as bees" making costumes and decorations for the celebration. It "should be a bawl," she wrote to her parents. "[A]nd Thank God, for it makes us feel like essential human beings again, and keeps us from thinking about the old jazz, and most important helps us to grow…and learn to live, and want to live, and really live, and thank god for life."[113]



Figure 17: SynaGras, 1962.

[112] Letter from Joyce to Mom & Dad, December 8, 1962, Box 172, UCLA Synanon
[113] Letter from Joyce to Mom & Dad, November 27, 1962, Box 172, UCLA Synanon.



Figure 18: Dance performance, with Betty Beckham in the middle.

Synanon people put a lot of importance on expressing themselves creatively. The house had Dance, Drama, and Art classes, taught by fellow Synanon people and outside supporters of Synanon.[114] Music lovers gathered in the basement to play jazz. They formed creative collectives out of these daily activities. Betty Beckham and Lena Lindsay were in the Synanon Dance Group, which held dance performances. [115] Beckham's experience in the Nation of Islam, during which time she studied African history, appears to have shaped the outline of the (regrettably titled) "Primitive Dance" class, which she led.[116] The Synanon Choir, of which Joyce Lauricella and Bobby Sharp were a part, practiced frequently for the "sing-a-longs" they held at Saturday

[114] Residence data sheet of Betty Beckham, author's personal collection.
[115] "The People of the State of California [Plaintiff] vs. Betty Jean Coleman [Defendant]," Box 34, UCLA Synanon.
[116] Residence data sheet of Betty Beckham, author's personal collection.

Night Parties.[117] "[We sing] old time, groovy tunes," Lauricella said, "and we get real hammy. The fellows sing real loud and the girls do, too. We try to sound like a choir of angels."[118] Jam sessions morphed into the Synanon Band and their 1962 album, *Sounds of Synanon*, on which Joe Pass, a renowned jazz guitarist, played alongside Kandy Latson, an amateur, on the congas.[119] (The album's third piece was titled, "Stay Loose.") These things were organic extensions of their daily life, emerging out of their relationships with each other.

Synanon people also connected with the surrounding community. Every week, they held "Saturday Night Parties," which were open to anyone who wanted to see what Synanon was all about. While Synanon people asked visitors to refrain from drinking alcohol before attending, they knew how to have a good time. Cigarettes and coffee were free-flowing. The Synanon jazz band played loudly, and people danced the Synanon "Hoop-La." Drug addicts and "squares," or non-addicts, hung out together, chatting and laughing, and even debating with each other during the mini=seminars that Synanon people held at the parties. They celebrated Synanon "birthdays," which marked the date that a member had first moved into the house, and put on comedy skits. During one, some resident had convinced Dederich to "put on a ballerina costume and a long wig" and go "leaping into the room in a little fluffy slip," an image that sent Synanon people into gales of laughter for weeks afterward.[120] Celebrities and intellectuals came by on Saturday nights, from Eartha Kitt and Lucille Ball to Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt psychology, and Guy Endore, a novelist and screenwriter. The parties became hot tickets. When a local college

[117] "The People of the State of California [Plaintiff] vs. Betty Jean Coleman [Defendant]," Box 34, UCLA Synanon; Letter from Joyce to Mom & Dad, November 27, 1962, Box 172, UCLA Synanon.
[118] Letter from Joyce to Mom & Dad, November 27, 1962, Box 172, UCLA Synanon.
[119] *American Rehab,* episode 2, "Miracle on the Beach," aired July 2020, https://revealnews.org/podcast/american-rehab-chapter-two-miracle-on-the-beach/.
[120] "Transcript: 631004 – I love Chuck in 25 words," Box 226, UCLA Synanon.

student dropped by one weekend circa 1962, she was turned away by the Synanon man at the door—the house was too full already.[121]

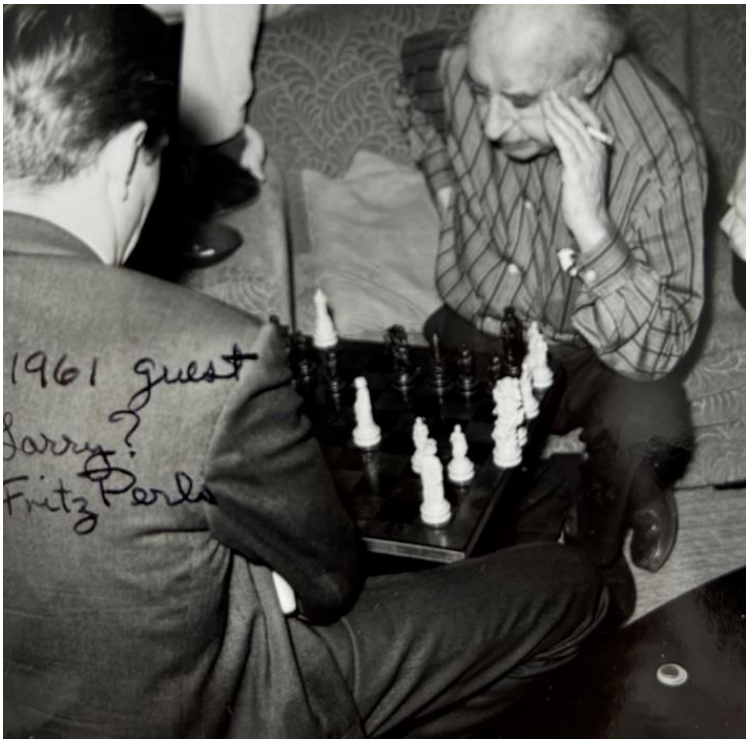


Figure 19: Fritz Perls playing chess with another Saturday Night Party guest, 1961.

Synanon people valued how their collective helped uncover what made people tick at the deepest level, what made them feel purposeful. The limitations placed on people deemed defective were not real, they argued, but products of a misguided society, too focused on fitting people into prescribed roles without regard for their unique essence. During one house discussion, Dederich brought up the case of one resident, John, who had lost both of his legs and suffered from a terminal disease, to illustrate the contrast between the mainstream and Synanon:

> The way bilateral amputees are handled in the educational system, in the institutional way of doing it, is to say, 'Well, here's one that's fairly mobile with the hands. We will teach it to solder'… This method is doomed to fail ninety-nine percent of the time… I would say the chances are that it really does not want to solder, because how could you pick soldering out of the million and one designs for living? Unless you suddenly run into a bilateral amputee who really dug soldering—

[121] Elena Brovlosky. Zoom interview by author, December 14, 2020.

> the combination makes the brain reel… We don't do things like that. We took John in and cut him loose. He was exposed to whatever it is that goes on in Synanon, various kinds and types of interaction, on the floor, on the ceiling, in the Synanon rooms, bull sessions… and he found himself [to be] a law clerk. The last thing one would think as John came reeling in on that go-cart of his, all sad sack and everything. Nobody could stand aside and say, 'I'll tell you what we're going to do, by God. We're gonna make a law clerk out of this one' … [John] said, 'You know, I need some books.' So books he got. 'I need a notary seal.' So he gets an application and pretty soon he's a notary type of fellow. And before you know it, he's taking a guy down to San Diego and taking his go-cart right up the middle of the courtroom and the bailiff is opening the gate and he wheels himself in [to see] the judge and, for Christ's sakes, he's defending a kid in court.

The "institutional way" reduced John to a cog in a much larger machine, which would use John for its own sake. "It" would "solder" because, hey, at least "it" had hands to be put to use. Synanon did not operate that way. They had no premeditated "designs" for what John should be, nor would they prioritize what Synanon needed from him over what John needed to figure out for himself. He had to discover what made him tick, what lit him up on the inside—in order to stay clean, yes, but also just for his own sake, for the sake of making the most out of one's brief existence. So Synanon "cut him loose" inside their world, inside their "culture." "You take a bunch of milk," Dederich posited, "and throw it into the pan and throw a teaspoon full of yogurt in, and if the environment is right, if the temperature is within a certain tolerance, pretty soon you got a whole pan of yogurt. It converts everything." Synanon followed this model as it tried to do what was "unthinkable" in the mainstream culture: "breathe life into the middle of the organism so that the bilateral amputee dope fiend turns into a law clerk."[122] The beautiful thing, Dederich thought, was how it worked out better for the collective and the individual in the end. John had found purpose in the last years of his life, and Synanon had been made better for it.

From its earliest years, Synanon encompassed the varied spectrum of existence: work and play; family, friends, and romance; education and cultural production; spiritual and philosophical inquiry. It was not intended to be an interruption to one's regular life, but a place to explore new

[122] "By Pass #9," Box 208, UCLA Synanon.

ways of being and living together. Even more, it extended a vision of an exciting, fulfilling future to people who had grown accustomed to living under severe social stigma and hearing that the prospect of "cure" was dismal, if not nonexistent. For many Synanon people, like Betty Beckham, that future would take occur within the context of Synanon itself. "It's all here," Beckham explained. "For the first time in my life, I feel that I really found my niche… I wake up with a kind of wonderment… After forty years, I've made a cycle of heading in a direction of having all the things that I've wanted all my life… My needs, or desires, or hostility, or whatever—being able to make these feelings heard by other people. It has been a new way of life for me… The pain of [the lonely years prior] has become lessened. I can actually feel the warmth that people have for me, and I guess it's because I have a warmth for them… In a few months, I'll be forty years old—and I feel young."[123]

Synanon people did not think about their home as a drug rehabilitation center or any type of treatment facility, which aimed solely to sober people up and return them to their lives after a prescribed amount of time. Their previous attempts at sobriety had focused so much on the details of their addiction and what they should *not* be and do, but Synanon's philosophy of getting clean did the opposite. It looked ahead to what they *could* do with their minds and bodies and hearts—the art they could produce, the ideas they could explore, the relationships they could sustain, the new forms of economy and labor and leisure that they could create. They experienced Synanon as a place that challenged them to reimagine what life could look like altogether, and healing would come as a result.

[123] In Beckham's case, this was true. She lived in Synanon until her death from lung cancer in 1977.

Chapter 4:

"Help us preserve the right to help ourselves": Synanon's Fight for Self-Determination, 1959-1961

"We just stumbled on this [being]… given to one of our donors in Santa Monica," Reid Kimball wrote to California Assemblyman Nicholas Petris in late April 1961. "[It] will give you insight into the calibre of at least a segment of the opposition to A[ssembly] B[ill] 2626." The item in question was an open letter signed by the "Santa Monica Beach Taxpayers League" expressing outrage that:

> 40 or 50 narcotic ex-addicts, ex-convicts, ex-prostitutes, etc. are now entrenched in an old beach club building, raking in tax-free donations, and are grinding out bales of publicity in an attempt to change the well established Health & Safety Code for their own benefit…
>
> [Assembly Bill 2626 would change the code] so that Narcotic addicts can be treated by almost anyone, as long as no narcotics are given. THIS WILL OPEN UP THE POSSIBILIY OF UNLICENSED, NON-PROFESSIONAL 'TREATMENT' AND HOUSING CENTERS ALMOST ANYWHERE, and is a very dangerous liberalizing of the law. This is entirely unnecessary, as the State of California is right now in the process of spending millions to handle the problem professionally and on a large scale…
>
> Santa Monica Beach is becoming completely identified with 'SYNANON', and its narcotic addicts, ex-convicts, ex-prostitutes, etc.[1]

The League may have been surprised to hear that Synanon people were more roused by the letter than they were offended. Before that week's Saturday Night Party, Kimball told Petris, they even posted a copy of it on the bulletin board "for the delectation of our guests."[2] They found humor in the sensational picture it painted of them, even though the matter at hand was serious: in less than three months, if Assembly Bill 2626 [AB 2626] did not pass, Synanon would be evicted from their home.

[1] "Re: Synanon Foundation," petition circulated by the Santa Monica Beach Taxpayers League, April 24, 1961, Folder LP318:10, 1961. Assembly – Nicholas Petris, Bill Files, AB2626, California State Archives (NP-CSA).
[2] Letter from Reid Kimball to Nicholas Petris, April 29, 1961, (NP-CSA).

Synanon's move to the armory building in mid-August 1959 triggered fierce opposition among Santa Monica officials and a group of influential locals, who came together to try to remove the group from the beachfront. Not only was Synanon "unlicensed" and "non-professional," but it also operated on the premise that addicts could be treated "almost anywhere" instead of confined in an institution. As a result, Synanon had brought people into their community whom they found unsuited to free society; "narcotic addicts, ex-convicts, [and] ex-prostitutes," should not, the League implied, be sharing a beach with law-abiding citizens and "taxpayers."

At the time of Kimball's letter, Synanon people had been fighting to keep their home for nearly one and a half years. They organized legally and politically to counteract the city's suit against them, and mobilized their growing network of "square" supporters—which included individuals like the one who gave Synanon a copy of the League's broadside—to aid them in the fight, too. AB 2626, which the local press called the "Save Synanon Bill," was a direct result of Synanon's organizing and outreach; Assemblyman Petris, with whom Kimball was corresponding, had written the bill on Synanon's request.[3] The people whom the League cast as criminals and degenerates were dialoguing directly with state legislators, and their interests were being taken into consideration.

This chapter chronicles how Synanon and their opponents clashed over their radically different ideas about what "treatment" meant, what its purpose was, and how it should be governed, as well as addicts' place in the broader society. The City of Santa Monica opposed Synanon in the name of treatment as defined by the era's institutional consensus. Yet Synanon

[3] "Save Synanon bill signed by Govenor," June 21, 1961, Santa Monica *Evening Outlook*, Santa Monica Public Library, microfilm.

challenged the very right of government officials—and, in fact, anybody who was not an addict—to intervene in their affairs at all. Synanon people argued that their status as "narcotic ex-addicts, ex-convicts, [and] ex-prostitutes" gave them a higher authority over the process of "getting clean," which they did not see as a medical endeavor, because their way had worked where state-backed cures had not. They also defended and explained their philosophy of getting clean, which identified social belonging as an essential part of the process. The fact that their presence in free society made some uncomfortable did not mean that Synanon people had to be the ones to cave; they insisted that they were just as much a part of the polity as anyone else, and should be treated as such.

The Institutional Consensus Strikes Back

Synanon's move to the armory, compelled by Santa Monica's condemnation and demolition of their clubhouse, turned out to be not the solution to their problems, but the beginning of a longer, wider struggle for existence. Though Synanon's new home at 1351 Ocean Front—an abandoned three-story building that had been a National Guard armory during World War II and a glamorous beach club in the 1920s—was only a mile and half north of their rundown storefront, it was in many respects located in a different world. The Jonathan Club, one of the most exclusive social clubs in Los Angeles, was a few blocks away, as was the wealthy enclave known as the "Gold Coast," where movie stars had their beachfront mansions. Within days of Synanon's move, a group of approximately fifty residents calling themselves the Beach Front Property Owners' Association held an emergency meeting. Among their ranks were real estate developers, entertainment lawyers, and Hollywood producers, all of whom were worried about the sudden presence of self-identified "dope fiends" in their coastal paradise. Synanon's

landlord, Ephraim Ralph, attended the meeting in hopes of quelling their fears, but failed.[4] The group crafted a petition calling for Synanon's immediate removal, which they sent to Santa Monica's City Council along with letters of individual protest. City Hall scheduled a town hall seven days later, on August 25, to address the controversy.[5] Three days after the town hall, Santa Monica City Attorney Robert Cockins took legal action to evict Synanon from the armory, kicking off a legal, political, and public relations battle that would last several years.[6]

Anti-Synanon locals argued that admitted drug addicts had no place in their community. The conviction that drug addicts posed an urgent criminal threat to non-addicts, a key tenet of the mid-twentieth century's institutional consensus around addiction, animated their opposition. Implicit in their critique was the belief that individuals once addicted never really outgrew that label; the fact that Synanon members claimed to be sober and committed to creating a sober community seemed to make no impact on their opponents' perception of them. One member of the Beach Front Property Owners' Association, a "Mrs. Sheldon Penn," who resided at 1413 Ocean Front, protested, "Is our beautiful beach front a place for felons and narcotic addicts?" She demanded that the city evict Synanon as soon as possible—"before anything happens." Another protester asked City Hall to "increase police protection" in the meantime, so Synanon residents' presumed criminality would be corralled.[7] The local paper, the Santa Monica *Evening Outlook*—whose editor, Robert McClure, was the uncle of City Attorney Cockins—published an editorial decrying the presence of "felons" in their neighborhood; the columnist emphasized that felonies were crimes "'usually of greater enormity, as treason, murder, rape, robbery, arson,

[4] "Transcript: 620000A CED on Venice," Box 224, UCLA Synanon.
[5] Meeting Notes, City Council of the City of Santa Monica, August 25, 1959, Santa Monica City Hall Records.
[6] "Foundation Charged With Code Violations," September 20, 1959, *Los Angeles Times*, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, WS7.
[7] "Synanon to Face SM Complaints: Residents Protest Dope-Cure Center," August 26, 1959, Santa Monica *Evening Outlook*, Santa Monica Public Library, microfilm.

etc.'"[8] Another *Evening Outlook* editorial asserted that "the evil of drug addiction is not confined to those it has wrecked," but inevitably spread to the public, "because most addicts will rob, prostitute themselves, commit almost any violence to obtain their supply." The paper said it was motivated most of all by a desire to "protect our youth," since the beach "attracts hundreds of thousands of young people each year."[9] The Santa Monica Beach Taxpayers League, another opposition group, identified another potential victim: the city's economic elites. At a time when the city was trying to turn their beachfront into a profitable tourist attraction, Synanon could "[make] Santa Monica the NATIONAL HAVEN FOR NARCOTIC ADDICTS" and do "immeasurable harm to the owners of income real estate, and especially to the hotels and motels who rent to persons who come here to use the beaches."[10]

Some of Synanon's opponents questioned whether the group was actually committed to sobriety at all. Like the officers of the Los Angeles Police Department who surveilled and broke up fledgling Narcotics Anonymous meetings in the 1950s, a number of anti-Synanon officials and locals wondered whether the group was using rehabilitation as a clever front to hide their illegal activities. At the August 25 town hall meeting, the Santa Monica City Council unanimously passed a motion for City Attorney Cockins to "prepare an ordinance prohibiting such activities under the *guise* of rehabilitation [emphasis added]." The use of the word "guise" suggested that Synanon was not what it said it was—that its residents were not trying to get "clean" at all. One opponent, a lawyer named Howard E. Beckler, suggested that anyone who believed Synanon was a sober house suffered from "an extreme naivete" about addicts. In a letter

[8] Petris confirmed familial link in handwritten note, May 13, 1961; Walker Winslow, "Experiment for Addicts," April 29, 1961, *The Nation*, (NP-CSA).
[9] "Why We Want Synanon to Move," April 20, 1960, Santa Monica *Evening Outlook*, Folder LP318:10, 1961. Assembly – Nicholas Petris, Bill Files, AB2626, California State Archives.
[10] "Re: Synanon Foundation," Santa Monica Beach Taxpayers League pamphlet, enclosed in letter from Reid Kimball to Nicholas Petris, April 29, 1961, (NP-CSA).

to a reporter who had aired a sympathetic piece on Synanon, Beckler offered "an X-ray" of life in Synanon as he imagined it:

> "A.B., a novice in the use of drugs; pretty, blond, young, just been 'chippying' six weeks but realizes problem. [She goes to] Synanon for help… Grand lectures and an especially fine oratory by C.D., and close of session. C.D. says to A.B. 'My pad for coffee and more talk?' 'Sure,' says A.B… instead C.D. got his fit (hypodermic needles, bulb, etc.), and laid out a spread of gear (heroin) that would make a Gaiety Delicatessen Cater affair appear rank amateur. And so it was to never, never land…"[11]

In Beckler's mind, "C.D."—a barely-anonymized reference to Chuck Dederich—advertised Synanon as a place of aid in order to lure unsuspecting young women to his "pad," where he got them high and perhaps exploited them in other ways when "A.B." drifted off to "never, never land." (It seems likely that the journalist, far from being persuaded by Beckler's letter, showed it to Synanon people; the group sued Beckler for libel within a couple weeks of it being sent.[12])

The primary course of action that the anti-Synanon movement pursued, however, was to argue that Synanon was in fact treating addicts, but that they were doing so illegally, for addicts could only be treated in a controlled institutional environment by medical professionals. In other words, opponents did not frame their critique as being *against* treatment (and *for* incarceration, say), but as one that advocated for the proper type of treatment. At the August 25 town hall, a member of the Beach Front Property Owners' Association "expressed 'sympathy with the rehabilitation of narcotics addicts,' but "urged that Synanon seek a headquarters in an already established hospital."[13] Cockins followed this line of thinking in the charges he brought against Synanon. First, Santa Monica charged Synanon with being an unregulated hospital for operating a) without a license, b) in a residential zone, c) not up to safety regulations required of hospitals.

---

[11] Letter from Howard E. Beckler to Lew Irwin / ABC Television and Radio Station, April 4, 1961, Exhibit in Synanon v. Beckler, April 26, 1961, C769907, Los Angeles Superior Court Archive.
[12] *Synanon v. Beckler,* C769907, Los Angeles Superior Court Archive.
[13] "Synanon to Face SM Complaints: Residents Protest Dope-Cure Center," August 26, 1959, Santa Monica Evening Outlook, SM Public Library, microfilm.

In what would prove to be the most important charge, the city also accused Synanon of treating addicts in a place not specified in Section 11391 of California's Health and Safety Code, which governed addiction policy in the state.[14] "No person shall treat an addict for addiction," Section 11391 read, "except in one of the following: (a) an institution approved by the [State] Board of Medical Examiners, and where the patient is at all times kept under restraint and control. (b) A city or county jail. (c) A state prison. (d) A state narcotic hospital. (e) A state hospital. (f) A county hospital."[15] Since Synanon was not one of those options, Santa Monica argued, it was an illegal operation.

Synanon's opponents worried most about the fact that Synanon people could move freely throughout the community instead of being forcibly confined behind walls.[16] The institutional consensus held that treatment had to come with "controls" for the purposes of efficacy and protecting public safety. "The intent of this section [11391]," Cockins argued on behalf of Santa Monica, "…is that once an addict begins withdrawal, his movements should be controlled and the patient should be restrained so that he cannot in mid-withdrawal leave his place of treatment to roam the community… [Treatment] requires that the patients be kept under restraint and control in a properly supervised institution so as to protect himself, his attendants, and society from the addict himself."[17] Because Synanon lacked this essential feature of addiction treatment, opponents believed, it invalidated itself as a serious, safe endeavor. The editors of the *Evening*

[14] Yablonsky, *Tunnel Back,* 30.
[15] Assembly Bill 2626, *Office of Legislative Counsel Report on Assembly Bill 2626,* June 16, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[16] It is important to note that Synanon *did* have rules regarding entering and leaving the premises. Newcomers, for example, were supposed to have a chaperone (in the form of a resident who had lived in Synanon, and therefore had been sober, longer) if they left the house to see a movie, walk on the beach, etc. There was also a sign-in/sign-out sheet that residents were supposed to use. These rules were certainly enforced by residents, but they were also just as often broken. If somebody wanted to leave, they could leave—and plenty of people did.
[17] Letter from Robert Cockins to Assemblyman Byron Rumford, April 26, 1961; enclosed in correspondence from Byron Rumford to Nicholas Petris, (NP-CSA).

Outlook agreed that "curing present drug addicts" was a "splendid" idea, "but we think Mr. Dederich would agree that the majority of drug peddlers have no desire to be cured. Synanon itself emphasizes that no one can be cured unless he or she sincerely desires to be. This desire is found only in a minority of addicts…"[18] The Santa Monica Beach Taxpayers League scorned Synanon's method more forcefully: only "40 or 50 narcotic ex-addicts" lived there, they said, while "hundreds of other addicts, criminals, etc. unsuccessfully have been 'processed' through this foundation… These 'uncured ones' are then turned loose in THIS community."[19] These critiques of Synanon's voluntary approach cast the movement of addicts as wild and threatening. Addicts did not walk the streets; they "roamed" them, hunting for potential victims. They did not belong in the community; they could only be "turned loose," wrongfully, within it.

The anti-Synanon campaign also accused the group of sexual impropriety. They were suspicious of so many men and women living together under one roof—especially women who were, as opponents frequently emphasized, "ex-prostitutes."[20] In June 1960, Santa Monica Mayor Thomas M. McCarthy went on a local talk show and insinuated that Synanon House was more akin to a brothel than a treatment center. When the host asked if Synanon "provide[d]" sex, McCarthy responded that when he visited, he had "asked the inmates of the place about this question, and [he] was told at the present time the boys out-numbered the girls about three to one, but they were getting more girls in lately."[21] (Synanon sued McCarthy for having

[18] "Why We Want Synanon to Move," April 20, 1960, Santa Monica *Evening Outlook*, (NP-CSA).
[19] "Re: Synanon Foundation," Santa Monica Beach Taxpayers League pamphlet, enclosed in letter from Reid Kimball to Nicholas Petris, April 29, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[20] "Re: Synanon Foundation," Santa Monica Beach Taxpayers League pamphlet, enclosed in letter from Reid Kimball to Nicholas Petris, April 29, 1961; see also "Why We Want Synanon to Move," April 20, 1960, Santa Monica *Evening Outlook*. Both documents were in Folder LP318:10, 1961. Assembly – Nicholas Petris, Bill Files, AB2626, California State Archives.
[21] "Exhibit 1: Tom Duggan Interviews Mayor Thomas M. McCarthy of Santa Monica," June 22, 1961, *Synanon v. McCarthy,* C778375, Los Angeles Superior Court Records

"maliciously made" statements about "a totally untrue experience," and demanded a retraction from the talk show host, who quickly assented.[22]) It appears that Santa Monica officials also spread word in government circles that Synanon had lesbian residents, which would have been an extremely controversial move in the late 1950s and early 1960s.[23] A politically well-connected Synanon supporter reported that the rumors were damaging Synanon's reputation in the eyes of powerful people; she had spoken with a Superior Court judge and the head of California Governor Jerry Brown's narcotics commission, both of whom expressed concern after hearing that the information came from sworn testimony in Santa Monica's case.[24] Opponents worried that Synanon's allegedly transgressive sexuality could spread beyond house borders. Joan Hunter, a vocal member of the Beach Front Property Owners' Association, told the Santa Monica City Council that Synanon's Saturday Night Parties, where Synanon people and visitors mingled, "looked more like a cocktail party" than a treatment center; "people were necking" everywhere.[25] According to Synanite Reid Kimball, though, Hunter may have been more concerned about what

[22] *Synanon v. McCarthy,* C778375, Los Angeles Superior Court Records

[23] The subject of homosexuality in Synanon is complicated. They did accept gay residents—notably, Joyce Lauricella, a key figure in Chapter 3, entered Synanon with her girlfriend. Grey Thompson also asserted that one of the first heroin addicts to join Tender Loving Care was an openly gay man. There is no evidence that Synanon tried to "cure" gay residents of their homosexuality, which would have been the standard medical-psychiatric response of that era. However, Synanon did not approve of gay members *acting* on their feelings. For example, Synanon people knew Lauricella was gay, but they made it a condition of her residence in the house that she break up with her "old lady." According to Dederich, it was "not a moral consideration," nor did her homosexuality "make a particle of difference to [him]. But for reasons… we will not have that sort of thing in any Synanon Foundation situation." Given the severe social stigma on gay people in the 1950s and early 1960s, it is very likely that this was, at least partially, a strategic decision. During the late 1950s crackdown on nonconformist Ocean Park that evicted Synanon out of its storefront, the first establishments shuttered by law enforcement were gay and lesbian bars, bathhouses, and beach spots. The City of Santa Monica even demolished the original Muscle Beach in 1959 after Police Chief Otto Faulkner accused "sexual deviants" of murdering a young teenager nearby. (See Devienne, "Urban Renewal by the Sea.") It is not hyperbole to say that if Synanon had been seen as a place where gays and lesbians could commune and date openly, it could very well have been the group's death knell. Perhaps Synanon leadership felt that this was a battle they would or could not fight. At the same time, prejudice among individual Synanon members must have been at play. Long past the point where the question of homosexuality would have been an urgent matter of organizational survival, Synanon still prohibited open same-sex relationships. Of course, gay and lesbian people still lived there, but in heterosexual relationships.

[24] Letter from Peggy Maddocks to Nicholas Petris, March 10, 1961, (NP-CSA).

[25] For Hunter's comments, see Walker Winslow, "Experiment for Addicts," April 29, 1961, *The Nation,* (NP-CSA).

her husband, the actor Jeffrey Hunter, was getting up to at those parties. Kimball recalled that Hunter had crashed the party in a drunken rage looking for her husband, who liked to hang out at the house on occasion. When she found him, Kimball said, she "smashed him in the face," started "screaming and insulting people, [and] went out and did a couple of spins in her Jaguar out front—real horrible, like a real beer garden dame"—before leaving.[26]

The City of Santa Monica brought the issue of sex into the courtroom, too, arguing that one aspect of Synanon's illegal treatment was their practice of "sex therapy." City Attorney Cockins drew on the testimony two former members, one of whom had originally been included in the city's charges before he agreed to become a witness for the prosecution. That witness, John Barisoff, a member of Dederich's A.A. spin-off group and former Synanon Director, testified that Directors decided "what persons or couples could or could not copulate." If couples got permission, they could sign up for two-hour blocks in the "T.V. Room," which "contained a couch, draperies, carpet, king-sized bed, and a television set" that was broken. "The T.V. Room was kept much occupied," Barisoff recalled, "particularly in the evenings."[27] Robert Arcand, another witness and former member, described his experience. After he and his new girlfriend told a director that they wanted to have sex, Arcand was "called to the [Directors'] office," where "they asked him if he wanted to 'make it' with the girl, he answered that he did; they told him they had decided to give their permission to copulate with the girl named; he was warned to guard against premature ejaculation, [and] he was told he could take the girl to the T.V. Room." Arcand also testified that his housemates talked about sex in small-s synanons, telling him that "he had an 'Oedipus complex' and a 'Transference with some girl you think is your mother; and

[26] "Transcript: 631004 – I love Chuck in 25 words," October 4, 1963, Box 226, UCLA Synanon.
[27] *City of Santa Monica v. Synanon,* No. C781299, LASC.

that his 'rigid upbringing' made him 'afraid of sex.'"[28] Santa Monica argued that these activities and comments should be considered formal addiction "treatments.[29] In Mayor McCarthy's talk show appearance, he referred to this testimony, claiming that "one of the methods of therapy is… prescrib[ing] a certain amount of intercourse to help cure these people."[30] City officials did not expound on why respectable citizens should find such practices wrong; they seemed to assume that it would be obvious. The mere suggestion of sex as therapy was enough to cast doubt on Synanon's legitimacy. When Synanon's lawyers argued that the claims were irrelevant to the legal charges at hand, Municipal Court Judge Hector Baida responded, "It may not be pertinent, but it's interesting… women are living on one floor and men on another. Something is bound to be going on."[31]

Santa Monica claimed that Synanon's lay approach to treating addiction was not just dissolute, but actually dangerous to addicts themselves. Its argument had two parts. First, the city had to make the case that what occurred at Synanon qualified as medical treatment, which was illegal because it was done by laypeople and not professionals. Second, they would assert that there was "medical danger in the method of treating addicts for addiction used by Synanon," specifically, the "'Cold Turkey' method of withdrawal."[32] City Attorney Cockins called on Dr. Jerome M. Kumner, a psychiatrist and consultant for Camarillo State Hospital, to support the prosecution's case. Kumner argued that Synanon "[had] medically treated narcotic addicts for addiction" because they provided "supportive physical" and "psychological" therapies during

[28] After giving this testimony, Arcand actually returned to Synanon, asking to be let back in. Synanon agreed, though Arcand would leave again some months later.
[29] *City of Santa Monica v. Synanon,* No. C781299, Los Angeles Superior Court Records
[30] "Exhibit 1: Tom Duggan Interviews Mayor Thomas M. McCarthy of Santa Monica," June 22, 1961, *Synanon v. McCarthy,* C778375, LASC.
[31] Walker Winslow, "Experiment for Addicts," April 29, 1961, *The Nation*, (NP-CSA).
[32] *City of Santa Monica v. Synanon,* No. C781299, LASC..

withdrawal. The "physical" therapy was "the eggnogs and vitamin pills given the members," while the "psychological" therapy was "the around the clock 'sick watch' that is always present, encouraging the addict to continue on with the withdrawal." This alleged medical treatment regimen was dangerous, Kumner testified, because "Cold Turkey" was not "medically approved" and it carried with it "a great likelihood of permanent injury or death." Psychiatrists used the method of "gradual withdrawal," where patients received smaller and smaller doses of substitute opiates, like methadone, as well as sedatives and other pharmaceuticals. This method was something that only medical professionals could implement; Synanon people had no legal access to those drugs even if they had wanted to use them. For Kumner, that was the point, as he was arguing that Synanon's entire philosophy was misguided. It was "based on the method of the 'blind leading the blind,'" he concluded, "contrary to a trained, professionally educated medical doctor, as used in institutions to treat addiction."[33] Santa Monica used Kumner's testimony to oppose Synanon on behalf of addicts, who were supposedly endangered and ill-served by being there instead of mandatory institutional facilities.

Santa Monica's campaign against Synanon had swift and serious consequences for Synanon people. After a ten-day trial in February 1960, Judge Baida ruled against Synanon on two counts, deciding that Synanon was guilty of running a hospital in a residential zone and also, somewhat paradoxically, illegally treating addicts for addiction in a place not specified in state law.[34] What came with the guilty verdict was a court order to evict Synanon. Baida suspended sentencing proceedings—which could have resulted in jail time for Dederich, Pratt, and two

[33] *City of Santa Monica v. Synanon,* No. C781299, LASC.
[34] "Synanon Trial Opens in SM on Monday," February 6, 1960, Santa Monica Evening Outlook; "Synanon Trial Finished: Decision Not Seen For Weeks," February 19, 1960, *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*; DC 39; "Foundation Charged With Code Violations," September 20, 1959, *Los Angeles Times*, p. WS7.

other Synanon Directors—on the condition that Synanon leave the armory by May 10.[35] Synanon filed an immediate appeal, as well as a request to postpone Judge Baida's order to vacate.[36] Over the next year, which saw appeal after appeal, Synanon managed to get their eviction date pushed back by a few weeks or months at a time. But their feeling that a guillotine was hanging over their heads, ready to drop at any moment, remained.

There was another consequence to Santa Monica's suit, too. After Synanon's conviction, the California Department of Corrections (CA DOC) issued an order forbidding people on parole from living there. The order came with serious consequences; if parolees stayed in Synanon, they would be violation of their parole and at risk of being re-sentenced to prison. The court ruling against Synanon might have provided a pretext for the CA DOC to do what it wanted to do anyway: undermine an increasingly popular rival of the mandatory institutional treatment that they operated. It was "illogical," a top CA DOC official argued, "to ask a state agency to continue to approve the operation of an organization which has been found guilty of two counts of violating code sections by the state courts" when it had already tasked its own people with addict cases.[37] CA DOC head Richard A. McGee contrasted Synanon, "an uncontrolled, unresearched private agency," with his department's "ambitious new program for control and treatment of the addict," which had "mandatory prolonged treatment and close followup."[38] The CA DOC's decision posed a real threat to Synanon. Seven of their approximately forty-five members were on parole at the time of the order, and had to leave the house. (Synanon people

[35] "Judge Gives Ouster Order to Synanon," April 5, 1960, *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*.
[36] "Synanon Wins Delay in Moving Deadline: 42 Day Stay," May 5, 1960, *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*; "Synanon Wins Stay In Fight For Survival," June 30, 1960, *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*; "Decision on Narcotics Foundation Protested," September 4, 1960, *Los Angeles Times*, p. WS1; "Synanon Wins Court Delay," April 7, 1961, *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, SM Public Library, microfilm.
[37] Letter from Walter Stone to Charles Dederich, August 23, 1960, Box 121, UCLA Synanon
[38] Statement of Richard A. McGee, Director of DOC "in regard to Synanon for Art Berman," in Los Angeles Daily Mirror, September 6, 1961, Box 121, UCLA Synanon

called them the "McGee 7." Within months, five had relapsed and, for various reasons, ended up incarcerated. A sixth had died of a heroin overdose.[39]) It is very likely that the agency's order also applied to people on probation, which affected even more members.[40] The policy also would have strongly discouraged future newcomers on parole or probation from moving into Synanon, which was supposed to be able to take anyone regardless of circumstance. After a year of moving to the armory, Synanon people were reeling from the body blows struck by the institutional consensus.

Synanon Pleads Its Case

In response, Synanon challenged the premise of Santa Monica's charges, and of the institutional consensus writ large. At every opportunity, Synanon people flipped the script on their opponents, arguing that they were the ones who had to explain themselves, not Synanon. It was not Synanon's supposed illegal medical operation that was the problem, Synanon people argued, but the fact that they were a mixed-race, mixed-sex community. Dederich claimed that several locals had told him "in the quiet of [his] office" that "the sub rosa issue is the fact that we have an integrated family here in a segregated neighborhood."[41] He also reported that Ephraim Ralph, Synanon's landlord, had heard the n-word used at the first meeting of the Beach Front Property Owners' Association.[42] These private comments gelled with what Synanon people had noticed when they first moved into the armory—how the atmosphere around the armory changed when onlookers first saw Black residents in the group. Dederich remembered that "little old

[39] "Results to Date of McGee's 'Order to Leave Synanon,' flyer from Synanon, August 1960, (NP-CSA).
[40] There are multiple instances post-August 1960 of Synanon members on probation being ordered out of Synanon by their officers. For instance, Betty Beckham's case officer told her that "word really came down" that she had to leave Synanon on penalty of violating her probation, "Joanna Lee Interview #1 – Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon.
[41] Report of Assembly Interim Committee on Criminal Procedure, Vol 22, No 3, 1961-63, published January 1963, Box 221, UCLA Synanon.
[42] "Transcript: 620000A CED on Venice," Box 224, UCLA Synanon.

ladies in tennis shoes [and] crazed redneck types, both male and female, were peering in the windows" of the armory, looking shocked and horrified, but maybe a little titillated, too. ("We should have sworn out a complaint for Peeping Tomism," he half-joked.) [43] In fact, Synanon people and their supporters argued that the opposition's emphasis on sex in the house was also mostly about race. According to Reverend D.D. Harvey, a supporter of Synanon and the leader of Santa Monica's First Presbyterian Church, the intimacy between men and women of different races and ethnicities had "stirred up latent prejudices and some prejudices that [were] not so latent" among locals.[44] Their "integrated family" was a genuine point of pride for Synanon people, but it was also an effective weapon to use against Santa Monica in the early 1960s, when Southern segregationists were on national display cracking down violently on civil rights activists. Opponents were threatened enough that they publicly denied the claims; the Santa Monica Beach Taxpayers League declared that Synanon was "attempting by insinuation to distort any protest into a charge of racial intolerance," but it "had nothing to do with the problem."[45]

Along with their charges of ulterior motives, Synanon people also denied the specific legal arguments made against them by asserting that Synanon was not a medical endeavor and should not be evaluated by the standards of the dominant medical-psychiatric paradigm of addiction and rehabilitation. No doubt they helped addicts get clean, they argued, but that did not mean they were engaged in the practice of medicine—or "encroaching on the Medical Arts," as

[43] "Transcript: 620000A CED on Venice," Box 224, UCLA Synanon.
[44] Report of Assembly Interim Committee on Criminal Procedure, Vol 22, No 3, 1961-63, published January 1963, Box 221, UCLA Synanon
[45] "Re: Synanon Foundation," Santa Monica Beach Taxpayers League, (NP-CSA).

Synanon people would say, mockingly, of Santa Monica's charge against them.[46] One of Synanon's staunchest public supporters, journalist Walker Winslow, conveyed the group's philosophy in a 1961 editorial in *MANAS*: "'Treat,' in the sense that the word has application for what goes on at Synanon, is not 'treat' in a narrow, medical meaning, but covers the processes of interchange of sympathy and understanding which are the secrets of Synanon's success. Treatment occurs at Synanon, but not the sort of treatment which Section 11391 of the Health and Safety Code was written to control."[47] In legal documents, Synanon always put the word "treatment" in quotation marks, a reminder that the group disputed the conceptual foundation of the City's case. In one questionnaire, Synanon asked if Santa Monica could identify "the names and addresses of persons who have witnessed said 'treatment' and the dates on which they were present when said 'treatment' was rendered and state what said 'treatment' consisted of."[48] This request may have been an effort to undermine the testimony of prosecution witness Dr. Kumner, who admitted that he had "never been on the premises" of Synanon House.[49] Synanon also asked a number of physicians and psychiatrists, as well as one state public health official, to sign affidavits affirming that the group "[could not] be considered a hospital or sanitarium," that they were not "engaged in the practice of medicine," and that "no treatment in the medical sense, [was] rendered to any of the residents."[50]

Synanon people also disputed the claim that "cold turkey" withdrawal as practiced at Synanon was dangerous, or that it was indicative of a medical treatment regimen. They

[46] Letter from Reid Kimball to Wally Mawson, May 13, 1960, Folder "Wally Mawson," Box 173, UCLA Synanon; Letter from Chuck Dederich to Eugene Walker, May 11, 1960, Folder "CED – Chrons (Misc) 1959-1966," Box 542, UCLA Synanon.
[47] "Help for Synanon," May 17, 1961, MANAS, (NP-CSA).
[48] *City of Santa Monica v. Synanon,* No. C781299, LASC.
[49] *City of Santa Monica v. Synanon,* No. C781299, LASC.
[50] Affidavits of Charles Feldman, et al, *Synanon v. City of Santa Monica,* No. C731299, LASC

contrasted kicking "cold turkey" in Synanon with "real cold turkey," which was, according to Kimball, "when a poor hype's just dumped on the cold floor of a jail, and left to do it alone—or die. Some guys get scared as hell that way. They bash their brains against the bars… That's not what Synanon does to a guy." The features that Kumner pointed to as evidence of Synanon's alleged medical treament—the "rub downs" (massages), the twenty-four-hour "sick watch" (or Owl Watch) that offered support to the person kicking—were also proof of their compassionate communal approach. Just as Synanon people found it inconceivable that anyone would die or suffer grievous bodily harm while kicking in their house, they also thought it absurd to define "treatment," medical or not, as the act of withdrawing from drugs. "People see movies *Man with a Golden Arm,*" Kimball explained, "[and] they think it's glamorous to use dope and roll around the floor for ten minutes and then be cured. It doesn't work out that way."[51] The really hard part was everything that came after kicking. Dr. Kumner's evaluation focused entirely on the withdrawal process, which illuminated the fact that many mid-twentieth century clinicians equated treatment with the act of removing drugs from a person's system. (Otherwise Kumner could have argued, probably quite convincingly, that small-s synanons were a form of group therapy.) Synanon people rejected the idea that medicalized withdrawal showcased some expert knowledge the likes of which laypeople could never dream of supplanting. "Any idiot can stay off drugs," Dederich argued. "Lock you up in a cage. That's no problem… They do that for you in a Federal Penitentiary. They can do that for forty years and bury you clean, can't they?" In other words, if being "clean" was the same thing as just not having drugs in the body, then government officials could claim success by locking up addicts for the rest of their lives—which, as Chapter One covered, was an appealing option to some lawmakers. On the contrary, Dederich

[51] "$500-A-Day Habit," W. Douglas Lansford, circa 1961, unnamed publication, Folder "REID KIMBALL Subject File: Government," Box 169, UCLA Synanon.

argued, Synanon was not overly focused on teaching people "how to stay off drugs," but on "provid[ing] a place where you can find yourself," with lasting sobriety as both the necessary precondition and inevitable outcome.[52] That quest did not fit within the boundaries of formal medical practice or knowledge; it was an existential endeavor, and in Synanon, one that needed to be experienced with fellow recovering "dope fiends."

Synanon people were outraged by the notion that their approach could be branded illegal when they had experienced firsthand how ineffective the legal methods of treatment were. In February 1961, when Synanon's latest eviction date loomed closer and closer, fifty-two residents sent letters to President John F. Kennedy expressing incredulity at their predicament. (A few days prior, on February 21, the U.S. Supreme Court had denied to hear Synanon's final appeal on the grounds that the case did not pose a federal question. As such, Synanon's conviction stood.[53]) "I am one of the 70 clean drug addicts living at Synanon," Jack Hurst wrote. "For the past two yrs. I have, according to a municipal court, been living a healthy, productive life illegally. Would you please investigate?"[54] Many Synanon people contrasted their success in Synanon with the failure of legal forms of treatment. Jazz pianist Arnold Ross reported to Kennedy that over his fifteen years of heroin addiction, he "[had] tried all ways and means available to rid [himself] of this blight," including "state hospitals, private sanitariums, and psychotherapy, but "nothing [had] worked until Synanon." It was a "shameful paradox" that "the only workable solution to the narcotics problem" he had come across was facing extinction.[55] Resident James Ross also questioned why Synanon was the target of government censure when they had managed to

[52] "630204 A – Acting As If," Box 226, UCLA Synanon.
[53] "United States Supreme Court," February 21, 1961, *New York Times*, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 47.
[54] Letter from Jack Hurst to John F. Kennedy, February 20, 1961, "Synanon Foundation Correspondence and Newspaper Clippings," Box 3, National Archives at Atlanta (NARA).
[55] Letter from Arnold Ross to John F. Kennedy, February 20, 1961, NARA.

accomplish something that, in their experience, no institution had. "We at Synanon," Ross declared, "have collectively tried every known form of narcotic rehabilitation—prisons, jail, Ft. Worth, Lexington, private psychotherapy, sanitariums, and they have all failed. We have at last found an answer for ourselves… Why are the very people who profess to be dedicated to this problem trying to force us to disband and cease our efforts?"[56]

Synanon people posited the addict as a citizen, someone who could petition for redress when they felt their rights had been violated by the state instead of a subject whose status justified arrest and institutional confinement. They flipped the framework of the City of Santa Monica and the California Department of Corrections by asserting that government interference with Synanon was the real violation, both of Synanon people' autonomy and their chance at staying clean. "It is inconceivable to me that anyone…should be against Drug addicts curing themselves," resident Jerry Rush bemoaned. "This is my personal protest to you for the action taken against my right to rid myself of drug addiction."[57] Charles Hamer asked Kennedy to "Please help us to preserve the right to help ourselves," while Hellen Harris invoked the Bill of Rights in the postscript to her letter, signing off: "*… the right to pursue happiness…"[58] Other residents made it clear that they were not interested in support that tethered them to government agencies; they wanted "understanding and acceptance," as Anita Woien put it, insofar as that resulted in them being left alone.[59] Phillip Hunt told Kennedy that he had been sober for two years "after ten years of narcotic addiction with the usual incarceration in Federal Hospitals,

[56] Letter from James Ross to John F. Kennedy, February 20, 1961, NARA.
[57] Letter from Jerry Rush to John F. Kennedy, February 20, 1961, NARA.
[58] Letter from Charles Hamer to John F. Kennedy, February 20, 1961; Letter from Hellen Harris to John F. Kennedy, NARA.
[59] Letter from Anita Woien Ross to John F. Kennedy, February 20, 1961, NARA.

Federal Prison, local jails, etc… Need I express just what Synanon means to me? We do not need help as much as we need a chance and understanding of what we are doing."[60]

Synanon people' protests challenged the embedded hierarchy of priorities in mid-twentieth century addiction policy, where the health and safety of the public—which implicitly did not include addicts—came first. There was a forceful undercurrent to their letters to Kennedy, which declared that their health and safety mattered, too. Over and over again, Synanon people emphasized that if the consequences for them would be dire. "I am frightened of the prospect of being thrown to the winds," resident Marion Golden wrote. "I really can't afford to take the chance, as this is Life or Death to me!"[61] Gertrude Davis noted that she had been "a living dead thing" when she moved into Synanon. "Synanon has saved my life, in short," she continued. "If Synanon is closed about 70 people will be denied a chance to live."[62] As much as Synanon people feared what awaited them outside Synanon, they were also scared of losing the world they had built within it. Both Sandy Jackson and Carol Schofield referred to Synanon as their "home," which was now on the cusp of destruction. "Synanon is my home and it saved my life," Schofield wrote. "My home is at stake because of some unaware people who are afraid to help or understand what a blessing Synanon is."[63] Jackson's "home [was] being threatened," as was "the new way of life" he had found there after seven "very unhappy" years of heroin addiction.[64]

The radical implications of Synanon's insistence on prioritizing their own needs and convictions came to a head in the debate over Synanon's "open door" policy. The way that

[60] Letter from Phillip Hunt to John F. Kennedy, February 20, 1961, NARA.
[61] Letter from Marion Golden to John F. Kennedy, February 20, 1961, NARA.
[62] Letter from Gertrude Davis to John F. Kennedy, February 20, 1961, NARA.
[63] Letter from Carol Schofield to John F. Kennedy, February 20, 1961, NARA.
[64] Letter from Sandy Jackson to John F. Kennedy, February 20, 1961, NARA.

Synanon people saw it, even if their opponents were sincerely terrified by the thought of addicts living next door unrestrained, that fear did not supersede Synanon people' right to pursue the path that they believed would keep them alive, sober, and fulfilled. The same was true for those authorities in medicine, law enforcement, and government who argued that Synanon's program was wrongheaded or dangerous. To them, Synanon people held up their own track record against that of the institutions who were supposed to be the gold standard of treatment. Richard Casey noted that he had "taken all kinds of cures" and been in "hospitals, sanitariums, [and] jails" over his twenty years of heroin addiction, but "none [had] helped [him]." Yet in Synanon, he had "of [his] own free will been clean."[65] Synanon people were steadfast on the essential nature of their voluntary approach, which was emblematic of their entire orientation towards sobriety and life. The text of the Synanon Philosophy, which residents recited every morning, affirmed that, "No one can force a person towards permanent and creative learning. He will learn only if he wills to. Any other type of learning is temporary and inconsistent with the self and will disappear as soon as the threat is removed." The Philosophy highlighted Synanon's nonmedicalized paradigm of addiction, as neither that word nor "treatment," "sobriety," "rehabilitation," or "recovery" made an appearance, and also issued a direct critique of mandatory approaches. "Permanent and creative learning," or the art of living clean, could only happen if a person chose to devote themselves to it within a nourishing "environment that provide[d] information, the setting, materials, [and] resources" to support them.[66] Outcomes achieved by force would only ever be "temporary" and frail. Even if a person was sober after ninety days in Camarillo State Hospital or Lexington, that did not mean anything real or lasting had been achieved. The thought that

[65] Letter from Richard Casey to John F. Kennedy, February 20, 1961, NARA.
[66] Synanon Philosophy.

addicts were locked up and far away may have allowed others to feel they could rest easy at night, but it did not, Synanon people argued, benefit the people whose lives were actually at risk.

Aware of how controversial their commitment to voluntary sobriety was, Synanon people tried to convey to outsiders the psychological power of the "open door." In a lecture at San Fernando Valley State College, Dederich argued that the open door supplanted a relationship of force, with one based on trust—and, in a sense, a deliberately blind type of trust. A newcomer with only sixty days in Synanon under his belt and a long record of armed robbery would be given fifty dollars from the communal pot to go out and buy the house's next stock of cigarettes. That newcomer, Jimmy Middleton, remembered that day because he was "totally startled" by the request. He returned within forty-five minutes, cigarettes in hand. "If you want people to trust themselves and other people," Dederich said, "You do something first. You trust them first. Human beings will react in kind by and large; this is a chance we take."[67] Even when the trust was broken, so to speak, the open door still proved its value. Betty Beckham described how she had once "split," or left, Synanon. (She slipped out a door in the T.V. Room, where she had booked a two-hour slot with her boyfriend.) "A funny thing happened," Beckham recalled. "I didn't even fix [with heroin] …. I smoked some pot and I felt lonesome." She called Synanon the next day: "I said, 'I'm terribly sorry, I want to come back so bad. Will you let me and I swear I'll never leave again.' [Dederich] said, 'Be here at four o'clock.' I was there, I was just there, with my first feeling of belonging in anything. I really missed that gang and I just came right back."[68] On the contrary, when Beckham was in jail, she spent her days talking to the other inmates about where she would fix after being released, her anticipation building each day she was locked up.

[67] "Transcript: 651130 – SFVSC #8 "Saga of Reid Kimball," Box 230, UCLA Synanon.
[68] "Joanna Lee Interview #1 – Transcript Copy," Box 41, UCLA Synanon

In Synanon, though, she could act on the urge and then be disappointed by how it turned out, and full of regret for leaving her community behind in the process. And in that moment, Synanon's door opened the other way—to bring her back in again.

For Synanon's opponents who did not care much about *why* or even *whether* the open door worked for addicts, Synanon people disputed the charge that their organization posed a threat to its neighbors and criticized the more general stereotype that drug addicts were especially dangerous individuals. Yes, many Synanon people had criminal records, but there was "nothing big time" about the crimes that most of them had committed. The same was true for addicts as a whole, they argued. "[We don't] really do too much harm to other people, to the larger society," Dederich asserted. "We run around loaded, may engage in petty thievery, prostitution, and pimping. It's really kind of an annoyance" more than anything else.[69] Lena Lindsay saw it that way, too; she "would steal momma's gold tooth if it was laying [around]" and "[turn] tricks," but she "didn't hurt people. [She] didn't kill."[70] Synanon people decried the way that government officials and protesters talked about them, like they were homicidal maniacs "roam[ing] the streets," "turned loose," in search of victims.[71] "We're not ghouls waiting to eat the neighborhood children," Synanon Director Jack Hurst complained to the press.[72] They also accused Santa Monica of hyping up the threat that Synanon allegedly posed to the town. City councilmembers had issued a public report condemning Synanon, which cited crime statistics showing that seventeen people had been arrested in late 1959 and 1960 "in the 1300 block of

[69] Folder "Transcript: 621010 Getting Acquainted, Santa Monica," Box 224, UCLA Synanon
[70] Lena Lindsay. Interview by author, Los Angeles, August 27, 2019.
[71] Letter from Robert Cockins to Assemblyman Byron Rumford, April 26, 1961; enclosed in correspondence from Byron Rumford to Nicholas Petris & "Re: Synanon Foundation," Santa Monica Beach Taxpayers League pamphlet, enclosed in letter from Reid Kimball to Nicholas Petris, April 29, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[72] "Synanon Group Planning Court Test on Zone Law," February 24, 1963, *Sunday Herald*, Folder "Paper: 780125 Holy War Battle: Westport Connecticut," Box 208, UCLA Synanon

Coast Highway where Synanon [was] located." However, Dederich pointed out to the Los Angeles *Mirror* that "none of the arrests involved persons living at Synanon." He also said that he had asked the Santa Monica Police Department to release the records of those arrests, but that they "refused to give a breakdown of statistics used against the organization."[73]

Far from being threats to public safety, Synanon people insisted that they were actually a boon to the larger "square," or non-addict, community. (Synanon people used the word "square"—which came from beat and jazz circles to refer to unhip, conventional folks—with a playful matter-of-factness to differentiate the non-addicts from the "dope fiends.") On the most obvious level, they were living, breathing examples of people transformed, of the notorious narcotics problem resolved. In 1960 and 1961, Synanon people traveled to over sixty groups, clubs, and societies in Los Angeles for speaking engagements on narcotics, addiction, and Synanon's philosophy of getting clean. These included eight high schools and youth groups; thirty civic and service groups, from Lion's Clubs, Rotary Clubs, Kiwanis, and Optimist Clubs to the NAACP and Chambers of Commerce; seven churches; and six Democratic Party clubs and councils; as well as many others.[74] On a deeper level, Synanon people argued that their way of getting clean gave them a type of essential knowledge about living that applied just as much to square society and its problems. More than that, the intensity of their quest for self-knowledge—borne out of being ostracized and confined—compelled them towards the type of existential reckonings that squares could more easily avoid. "Square, addictive person—what's the difference?" Jimmy Middleton mused. "Somebody may be a TV addict, coffee, anything. But I figure I'm one step ahead of the average square. My neurosis manifests itself in drug addiction. I

[73] "Synanon Rap Police Statistics," Los Angeles *Mirror*, April 1, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[74] "Civic Activities," (NP-CSA).

know this. And I'm not fooling myself a bit, either… Whereas poor ole John out there in square culture, he's not even aware of it."[75]

Since mid-1960, Wednesday evenings in the house were reserved for "square synanons," attended by approximately fifty square regulars.[76] The Synanite participants acted as guide and provocateur, prodding the squares about their marriages, careers, and money just like they did each other about heroin. "It's funny," Middleton observed. "I see 'em on Wednesday night… and some of the things I watch them do, it's so obvious to me. It blares right out at you after you've been in this [Synanon] orientation after a while… Here's a couple that have been married for years and know nothing about each other. Nothing. All they got is what we call around here a 'Tender Trap.' They are like children playing grownups. You sit and tell them; they can't believe it. 'Impossible!' 'I love him!' 'I love her!'"[77] One of the first squares to participate in the Wednesday synanons was Guy Endore, the novelist and blacklisted screenwriter, was more open to absorbing Synanon people' knowledge. In synanons, Endore felt like he was leaving "a world of silence," where he had been "hampered by a tremendous burden of unexpressed ideas, thoughts, [and] feelings," for a place where people "[were] really keeping nothing back." Being in Synanon "cracked" him open, propelling him "to be energetic, to fulfill something, to work, to create, to play, to communicate, [and] to study."[78]

Seeing themselves as assets to square society, Synanon people defended their propensity to settle in desirable neighborhoods, arguing that they too deserved the benefits, and even the luxuries, of free society. Throughout their legal battles, which followed them wherever Synanon

[75] Jimmy Middleton, *Seven Voices of Synanon,* 16.
[76] "Transcript: 651207 – SFVSC Lecture #9 "Enter the Girls," Box 230, UCLA Synanon
[77] Jimmy Middleton, *Seven Voices of Synanon,* 24.
[78] "Transcript: 651207 – SFVSC Lecture #9 "Enter the Girls," Box 230, UCLA Synanon

opened or tried to open a new house in the early 1960s, residents got the same question: Why not settle in a more appropriate locale? Appropriate for drug addicts meant less populated, less connected, less rich, less beautiful, less desirable all around—something like, as one Los Angeles official suggested, a rural "farmhouse" or "some island," or even "an old but serviceable hotel… in an older downtown area" where other "missions" were located.[79] Synanon people rejected this logic completely—why should they only get to live in places that nobody else wanted to be, and were disconnected from the rest of society? Instead, they looked for homes in places about which they could get excited. Even the first ragged storefront in Ocean Park was right on the beach boardwalk, in the middle of the action. Their armory home was also beachfront; it opened out onto the sand, a volleyball court, and the Pacific Ocean. In 1963, as an effort to cool off tensions with Santa Monica, Synanon almost bought a sprawling, gorgeous property in Malibu. (It was next door to a Nike atomic missile base, which probably explained the owner's interest in a buyer as controversial as Synanon. The purchase was blocked by city officials and anti-Synanon locals.) That same year, Synanon opened a house in a mansion on four acres in tony Westport, Connecticut. (They would be evicted after a years-long zoning battle in 1966.) Synanon people, led by Dederich, chose these locations knowing that authorities and a portion of the locals would agitate against them with a high probability of success. But they did it anyway, on the grounds that they belonged there, too.

Synanon saw their relationship with the broader society as one built on reciprocity and connection. This way of thinking was a radical rejection of the logic underlying the institutional consensus, which rested on separating addicts from the community and writing them out of the

[79] "Transcript: 630403 – Synanon-Malibu Special Permit Case," Box 226, UCLA Synanon

polity. Synanon people wanted to be involved with "square" society, and insisted that it did "squares" good to be in close contact with "dope fiends," too.

Synanon Organizes

It was by no means a foregone conclusion that Synanon would be able to overcome the guilty verdict, handed down by Judge Baida in February 1960, in their legal battle against Santa Monica. In fact, Santa Monica officials probably expected an easy fight; after all, they had been cracking down on nonconformist sites in Ocean Park for at least a year at that point without receiving any pushback that threatened to upend their plans. Every member of the City Council was behind Synanon's eviction, as was the town newspaper, the *Evening Outlook*, and a number of wealthy, influential locals. But Synanon was not as isolated or vulnerable as it may have appeared to opponents, who, in their outrage over "ex-felons" and drug addicts moving in next door, did not anticipate the group having a significant amount of support from all sectors of society. It was precisely because Synanon was so embedded in the larger community that the conviction became a rallying point around which its supporters coalesced.

The relationship between Synanon people and its staunchest allies was close-knit and reciprocal, with "squares" relating to "dope fiends" as fellow participants in a movement exploring alternative ways of living. Synanon people made it clear that squares, whatever their income, pedigree, or level of education, could participate in Synanon only if they approached residents not as people upon whom they could bestow charity, but from whom they could learn. "We've got slews of [squares] who treat the place as their own club," Dederich explained. "It's a funny thing that the do-gooders and the phoneys get squeezed out very quickly… People have a tendency to become an actual part of the thing. If they come down carrying a banner, 'I'm going to help the poor unfortunate dope fiend,' it begins to dawn on them that the poor unfortunate

dope fiend is probably more vital than they themselves are.[80] Visitors with degrees in sociology or psychology would attend Saturday Night Parties, looking to enlighten Synanon people on what they could be doing better. It was a variation on what Santa Monica and California corrections officials were doing, assuming that their expertise was essential or that Synanon people were hungry for their validation. "You hear it quite often," Jimmy Middleton complained. "People actually sit down and tell me what's going on here—and it's their first visit! They really do… [Sometimes] you have to sort of insult them, with a little diplomacy in between." [81] The squares who stayed—who attended synanons and spent their free time doing clerical work at Synanon House—were the ones who could bear the fact that they were not at the center of things, and who were interested in living and working alongside Synanon people as equals. Unsurprisingly, intimate relationships blossomed between the two groups. In 1961, Guy Endore lived in Synanon for at least eight months and brought his teenage daughter to hang out there, too.[82] Lewis Yablonsky, a criminologist and something like Synanon's house academic, married a Synanon woman. Reverend D.D. Harvey, the religious leader of Santa Monica's First Presbyterian Church, attended square synanons with his wife.[83]

Squares' personal investment in Synanon motivated them to use their social, political, and financial capital to aid Synanon in its struggle to stay alive. Journalist Walker Winslow, who also lived in Synanon for at least two months, spread the word about Synanon's legal battles in national publications like *The Nation* and *MANAS*.[84] Winslow did not hide his support for Synanon; he lambasted Santa Monica officials for being more concerned about "sex and dope

[80] Charles Dederich, *Seven Voices of Synanon,* 91-92
[81] Middleton, *Seven Voices of Synanon,* 14.
[82] Anonymous interview with author, September 15, 2020.
[83] "Transcript: 651207 – SFVSC Lecture #9 "Enter the Girls," Box 230, UCLA Synanon.
[84] Letter from Charles Dederich to Eugene Walker, January 11, 1961, Box 542, UCLA Synanon.

fiends" than "former addicts… [having] the right to cure themselves in their own way and in a place of their own choosing." He also intimated that racial prejudice was at the heart of the anti-Synanon campaign: "Synanon has eighteen Negro members, but all petitioners deny that this had anything to do with the issue."[85] Synanon's academic supporters extended legitimacy and prestige to the group and countered charges that its methods were dangerous quackery. Yablonsky devoted most of his scholarship in the 1960s to Synanon; in 1962, he argued that it was a singular example of an "anti-criminal society," and in 1965, he published a book, *The Tunnel Back,* about its philosophy and methods.[86] Another UCLA criminologist, Donald Cressey, declared that Synanon was "the most significant attempt to keep addicts off drugs that [had] ever been made."[87] In the face of Santa Monica's accusations that Synanon was involved in all manner of sexual deviance, Rev. Harvey repeatedly and publicly vouched for Synanon's decency on radio shows, community events, and government hearings, and continued to hold a Synanite-led youth group at his church.[88]

Synanon's expansive network of squares introduced the group to the world of formal politics. By early 1961, Synanon had gained as strong supporters several Democratic organizers who had worked together on John F. Kennedy's 1960 presidential campaign and had personal ties to the Kennedy administration. One of Synanon's earliest squares, Rev. Harvey, was Kennedy's squadron commander during World War II, as was Al Cluster, the president of the San

---

[85] Walker Winslow, "Experiment for Addicts," April 29, 1961, *The Nation*, (NP-CSA).
[86] Yablonsky, *Tunnel Back*; "The Anti-Criminal Society."
[87] Dederich relayed Cressey's statement to a top CA DOC official in August 1960; 8-17-1960, letter from C.E. Dederich to Mr. Walter Stone, Chief of Adult Parole Division of CA DOC. *Time* magazine also confirmed Cressey's statement in "S.S. Hang Tough," April 7, 1961, *Time,* https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,874341,00.html
[88] "Transcript: 630323 – Book Talk (Near Group Communication), Box 226, UCLA Synanon;U.S. Senate Press Release, Sen. Dodd's comments on Synanon, Subcomittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, Sept 6, 1962; "LOG: 610908 KHRM Interview with D.D. Harvey," Box 224, UCLA Synanon.

Fernando Valley Citizens for Kennedy group.[89] Harvey brought Cluster to Synanon, and Cluster became a fast fan. In February 1961, Cluster wrote to Robert F. Kennedy praising the group and sharing Dederich's contact information.[90] (He also asked Kennedy to invite Synanon to the upcoming White House Conference on Narcotics and Drug Abuse, which they were.) Peggy Maddocks, the vice president of Cluster's Citizens for Kennedy group, would devote herself even more intensely to Synanon's cause. Maddocks was extremely well-connected, having worked for John F. Kennedy's Massachusetts Senate campaign in 1956 and Pat Brown's California gubernatorial campaign in 1958. Maddocks lobbied on behalf of Synanon in back-channels with top officials in the Brown administration, and refuted any negative stories they might bring up—one of which was the rumor that Synanon had something to do with "Lesbians or their adjustment."[91] It is likely that Maddocks, or another Citizens for Kennedy organizer, Mitzi Rubin, brought into the fight the Democratic California Assemblyman Nicholas Petris, who attended his first Saturday Night Party on March 4th and by April 17th was spearheading legislation to save Synanon from eviction.[92]

The addition of Assemblyman Petris to Synanon's band of square supporters was critical, for Synanon had run out of legal options when the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear their appeal in February 1961. Their guilty verdict stood, and Synanon's eviction date of July 14th was looming.[93] The mood in the house was grim. Maddocks and Rubin felt "helpless," Rubin wrote to Petris on April 3. "For the first time, most of [the Synanon people] appear nervous… We do

[89] Letter from Reid Kimball to Nicholas Petris, February 26, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[90] Letter from Al Cluster to Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., enclosed in letter from Reid Kimball to Nicholas Petris, February 26, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[91] Letter from Peg Maddocks to Nick Petris, March 10, 1961; Letter from Mitzi Rubin to Nick Petris, March 6, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[92] Letter from Mitzi Rubin to Nicholas Petris, March 6, 1961, February 26, 1961; Letter from Vincent Cavanaugh to Nicholas Petris, April 18, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[93] Letter from Vincent Cavanaugh to Nicholas Petris, April 18, 1961, (NP-CSA).

know, that if they lose the case, most of them will be back on the streets & 2 years work will be wasted."[94] However, though Synanon's future looked dire from a legal standpoint, their counter-offensive in the realm of popular opinion had borne fruit in the unlikeliest of places: Judge Baida's courtroom. In an April 7 hearing, which Synanon people had been dreading as the final death knell for their home, Baida showed them an escape route. His hands were tied, he said, as long as Synanon was not explicitly allowed by state law—but if that law were changed, he could move in their favor. "Sec 11391 of H&S Code," Petris wrote in his personal notes after receiving a call from Dederich. "Found guilty – Judge suggests amdmt to the code."[95] Within days, Petris wrote AB 2626, the "Synanon Bill," "along the lines suggested by Judge Baida."[96] AB 2626 amended Section 11391, which delineated the institutions where addicts could be treated, to state: "Nothing in this section nor any other provision … shall be construed to prohibit the maintenance of a place in which persons seeking to recover from narcotic addiction reside and endeavor to aide one another and receive aid from others in recovering from such addiction."[97] In private correspondence to Dederich, Petris warned that the bill's text would "undoubtedly be amended," as it "was drafted under emergency conditions with a great deal of haste."[98] Petris sent it to Judge Baida before Synanon's next hearing on April 17th, where Baida gave it his stamp of approval.[99]

In the weeks that followed, Dederich and other Synanon people were in near-constant communication with Petris, working in sync with one another to get AB 2626 passed quickly.

---

[94] Letter from Mitzi Rubin to Nicholas Petris, April 3, 1961, February 26, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[95] Handwritten notes of Nicholas Petris, April 7, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[96] Letter from Nick Petris to Mitzi Rubin, April 17, 1961, Folder LP318:10, 1961. Assembly – Nicholas Petris, Bill Files, AB2626, California State Archives; "Synanon Bill Goes to Senate," Los Angeles *Mirror*, May 31, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[97] Assembly Bill 2626, enclosed in letter from Nick Petris to Chuck Dederich, April 12, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[98] Letter from Nick Petris to Chuck Dederich, April 12, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[99] Letter from Vincent Cavanaugh to Nicholas Petris, April 18, 1961, (NP-CSA).

Petris believed that it would be most effective to center the support of influential squares. (One consequence of this strategy, at least in the press about Synanon in the early 1960s, was a near-total neglect of Synanon's nonconformist, experimental roots and culture.) After the April 17th hearing, Petris jotted down notes of how Synanon could "help on the bill," which included gathering magazine articles extolling its good works, "letters from parents," and "names of leaders in community helping them."[100] Together, Synanon and Petris assembled a list of witnesses that they thought would be most compelling to speak in front of the California Assembly's Committee on Criminal Procedure, which had to approve the bill before it came up for a general vote. Every witness but one was a prominent square: Rev. Harvey, who represented the "Religious Standpoint;" Dr. Bernard Casselman, a physician who could provide "Medical OK of cold turkey method;" professionals from "Psychiatry and Medicine" and "Sociology & Criminology;" and Howard Jewel, a "parent of resident" and California's Assistant Attorney General. The only Synanon person was Reid Kimball, who would testify as an "ex addict" and a "hometown boy" from Los Angeles.[101] The strategy worked. "Praises are still pouring in to my office about the unusually high quality of the presentation," Petris wrote to the participants after the May 17th committee hearing. "Each one of you convinced the committee with your sincerity, your earnestness, your quiet dignity, and the depth of knowledge on the subject."[102] The committee sent the bill through, and five days later, Petris reported to Synanon that there had been "Unanimous clearance through Ways & Means Committee."[103]

[100] Handwritten notes of Nicholas Petris, April 17, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[101] Handwritten notes of Nicholas Petris, May 15, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[102] Letter from Nicholas Petris to Dr. Bernard Casselman, Reid Kimball, Charles Dederich, Rev. C. Mason Harvey, Dr. Donald Cressey, Dr. Bernard S. Brandchaft, May 18, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[103] Telegram from Nick Petris to Chuck Dederich, May 23, 1961, (NP-CSA).

As AB 2626 made its way through the legislature, Synanon also organized their well-connected squares to garner public support and publicity for the bill. Square members organized a "Citizen's Committee to Save Synanon," which took on the name "Sponsors of Synanon," or "S.O.S."[104] Synanon published *Synanews,* a newsletter to keep the S.O.S. members apprised of the latest updates out of Sacramento and give them specific action items. In the inaugural issue of *Synanews,* a square supporter asked readers to write to their assemblymen in support of AB 2626, invite friends and elected officials to Saturday Night Parties, hold house parties and meetings to build a bigger network of supporters, donate money, and sign their names to press releases in support of Synanon.[105] The S.O.S. community did not disappoint. Seventy-one people who lived on Ocean Front Drive, the same street as the armory, sent legislators a mass letter of support that they signed "Neighbors of Synanon Foundation."[106] In Petris's records, there were letters from accountants in Beverly Hills, college students, and William Quinn, the former president of the California branch of the American Medical Association.[107] Quinn wrote as a medical professional and as a neighbor of Synanon, of sorts. Synanon's approach to addiction was "extremely practical," especially given, he implied, medicine's failure in that arena: "Let's not quarrel with success since there is very little success elsewhere." Quinn also noted that he belonged to the exclusive Jonathan Club, "which is within shouting distance of Synanon… [M]y children swim in the same beach, and, therefore, I can speak with some personal interest when I say I have no objection to Synanon in the location it is."[108] Synanon's opponents were not the

[104] "Synanews: For The Organizing of a Citizen's Committee to Save Synanon," Vol 1, April 22, 1961(NP-CSA).
[105] "Synanews: For The Organizing of a Citizen's Committee to Save Synanon," Vol 1, April 22, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[106] Petition from "Neighbors of Synanon Foundation," sent to Rep. Levering and Sen. Richards, enclosed in letter from Reid Kimball to Nicholas Petris, April 15, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[107] Letter from Philip Turetsky to Nick Petris, May 17, 1961; Letter from Alvin L. Lancaster, May 17, 1961; Letter from William F. Quinn to Nick Petris, May 12, 1961, all in (NP-CSA).
[108] Letter from William F. Quinn to Nick Petris, May 12, 1961, all in (NP-CSA).

only ones with social capital anymore; supporters had plenty to offer in service of the "Save Synanon" cause.

Behind closed doors, the major sticking point of AB 2626's passage in the Assembly and Senate was about how much autonomy Synanon would be granted. Synanon people wanted the bill to stop at authorizing their right to exist as a non-institutional "place of aid" for drug addicts. They worried that government officials would go further, either by putting them under the purview of a state agency or adding stipulations that medical professionals had to be on the premises or otherwise directly involved in Synanon. Legislators did just that, putting forth the idea that Synanon be overseen by the California Department of Mental Hygiene, which ran the state's mental hospitals. "NO," Petris wrote in his personal notes, after speaking with Synanon people. "It would destroy Synanon." Synanon might consider a "consultant situation," where "Dr. Blair [the head of Mental Hygiene] were to make recommendations… only w/o mandatory power. Danger is in having outsiders not acquainted with the procedures, problems." [109] Just as they did with square supporters, Synanon people insisted that outside help proceed on their terms as much as possible; the fact that they needed government officials to pass legislation did not mean that they should have to cede governance of their community.

As Synanon fought to keep the scope of the bill limited, Santa Monica officials tried to block its passage, before settling on shaping the final version. Initially, city officials petitioned state legislators to oppose AB 2626 by using the same arguments that had been successful in court. "There is considerable medical authority to the effect that Synanon's course of treatment is dangerous to the patient," City Attorney Cockins wrote to Assemblyman Byron Rumford, chair

[109] Handwritten notes of Nicholas Petris, May 13, 1961, (NP-CSA).

of the Public Health committee. "[T]he Legislature would be remiss if, because of wide publicity, it is stampeded into passing legislation governing the treatment of addicts which could very well be unwise," as it did not keep addicts "under restraint and control in a properly supervised institution." However, as Cockins implied in his comment about "wide publicity," the tide had turned substantially in Synanon's favor in the year since Santa Monica's suit. Rumford sent Cockins' letter to Petris; he was a "yes" vote on AB 2626.[110] By mid-May, Santa Monica officials appeared to realize that blocking the bill was a no-go, and started to lobby for medical and police oversight. After a May 13th meeting with Cockins and the Santa Monica Police Chief, Petris listed the issues that the city wanted addressed: "1. No medical supervision. 2. No restraint or control if they walk out," and thirdly, that "Duty [would be] on Synanon to report narcotics to police when they are brought in – rather – than flush the narcotics down the toilet."[111] The third issue is especially revealing of the essential conflict between the two sides. It is not clear how Santa Monica officials came to hear that this was something Synanon did, but the practice would fit with Synanon's sense of autonomy over what occurred in their community. If someone had illegal drugs in the house, that would not be an issue for the authorities; it broke Synanon's rules, it was Synanon's business, and Synanon people would handle it. Santa Monica officials, on the other hand, were pursuing legislation that would fundamentally transform the type of place that Synanon was—from a self-governing commune to a place subject to multiple kinds of external "controls."

The negotiations went back and forth as AB 2626 went to the California Senate, resulting in a final version that enshrined Synanon's right to help drug addicts with mutual aid, but also

[110] Letter from Robert Cockins to Byron Rumford, April 26, 1961; enclosed in copy sent from Rumford to Petris, April 26, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[111] Handwritten notes of Nicholas Petris, May 13, 1961; Letter from Nick Petris to Gov. Edmund G. Brown, June 17, 1961, (NP-CSA).

affirmed the legitimacy of core aspects of the institutional consensus. The bill kept the language that Petris had originally written, and which had been suggested by Judge Baida to give him the legal cover necessary to overturn his own eviction order.[112] Petris also pleaded with state senators to "resist… any amendment which would expand state or any other authority to regulate or supervise" because it would "ruin the whole concept of the place." It is possible that Petris had the CA DOC specifically in mind when he wrote this request, for he referenced the "archaic 'we vs. they' attitude of the inmates" as the fate that Synanon wanted to avoid at all costs.[113] Though neither the CA DOC nor the Department of Mental Hygiene would assume control over Synanon, medical and criminal authorities would have their say over Synanon's legality. To secure support from state senators, Synanon agreed to apply for licensure with the California Board of Medical Examiners and register every resident with the Santa Monica police.[114] (At first, Synanon agreed only to register those members with felony convictions on their record, but it seems that this concession was not enough.[115]) Synanon avoided what likely would have been the far more onerous oversight of institution-based state agencies, but they also had to acknowledge the basic authority of medical professionals in the realm of addiction and accept, implicitly at least, the idea that their presence was a threat to the community which required police attention.

AB 2626 went through in the nick of time, and went into effect just three weeks before Synanon's eviction date. On May 30th, the California Assembly passed it nearly unanimously, 70-1—and the one "no" vote from Assemblyman Harold Levering, whose district included Santa

[112] Assembly Bill 2626, *Office of Legislative Counsel Report on Assembly Bill 2626,* June 16, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[113] Letter from Nick Petris to CA Sen. Hugo Fisher, June 9, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[114] Letter from Nick Petris to Gov. Edmund G. Brown, June 17, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[115] Handwritten notes of Nicholas Petris, May 13, 1961, (NP-CSA).

Monica, actually supported the bill in private.[116] Petris wrote to Dederich to explain the situation, perhaps because he did not want Synanon to turn its effective organizing against Levering. "Please bear in mind that he has been extremely helpful to me in handling the bill," Petris wrote. "[He] is still being subjected to a great deal of pressure from individual property owners… I, myself, suggested to him that he might as well vote against the bill," given the fact that everyone else was voting yes.[117] After the amendments were added, AB 2626 was also passed unanimously through the Senate on June 16th and signed by Governor Brown into law on June 21st.[118] Though the City of Santa Monica petitioned Judge Baida to uphold Synanon's eviction, he decided on September 22nd that "his court had no authority to order Synanon to vacate." Instead, he sentenced Dederich to serve a thirty-day jail sentence for the remaining zoning violation.[119] The armory at 1351 Ocean Front Drive would remain Synanon House.

Synanon's campaign to keep their home was a substantial challenge to the mid-twentieth century institutional consensus. It emphasized the importance of addicts staying in the community and having autonomy over their own path to getting sober; the invocation of "public health and safety" should not be able to write addicts out of the public, but needed to encompass the protection of their welfare as addicts themselves defined it. In sum, Synanon forwarded the idea that addicts were full citizens, not only capable of asserting their wants but fully entitled to the rights that they demanded.

---

[116] "Synanon Bill Goes to Senate," Los Angeles *Mirror*, May 31, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[117] Letter from Nicholas Petris to Charles Dederich, May 26, 1961, (NP-CSA).
[118] "Save Synanon Bill signed by Governor," June 21, 1961, Santa Monica *Evening Outlook*, Santa Monica Public Library, microfilm.
[119] "Baida give sentence, can't oust Synanon," September 22, 1961, Santa Monica *Evening Outlook*, Santa Monica Public Library, microfilm.

Conclusion

The victory enshrined in AB 2626's passage was the beginning of a new era for Synanon people. They were bolder, had bigger plans, and a sense that they were fully capable of implementing them. The move from the ratty storefront to the armory was a major psychic river-crossing, marking the transition from clubhouse to a commune built and maintained by their own hands that was worthy of defending—even if it meant, as it did for Dederich, jail time. Synanon people went from feeling like moving to a respectable part of town would break their community—the inevitable result of getting above themselves—to experiencing power firsthand. They could rally non-addicts to their cause, and demand the right to pursue what they believed was necessary to stay clean, regardless of what police officers, hospital psychiatrists, or anyone else thought. It was through their struggle to maintain autonomy over their community that Synanon was really forged, with internal strength and a vision of a collective future for its members.

It was a good thing, too, because Synanon's battle with the City of Santa Monica was not fully over, even with AB 2626's passage. Municipal officials made it clear to Synanon that they could still move for eviction on the basis of other zoning violations, either a new law that the City Council would write up specifically to target them or the charge that had worked last time, in Judge Baida's court, which claimed that Synanon was operating a hospital in a residential zone. But since August 1959, the winds had started to blow a different way, and both Synanon and Santa Monica felt it. The city could pursue these charges, but it would look heartless and vindictive. Synanon people knew they could mobilize their forces again, but they were tired of the fight. The two groups reached an "armistice" in January 1962; Santa Monica agreed to drop

their campaign against Synanon on the condition that it begin looking for a new home base.[1] By this point, Synanon people were itching to experiment with something bigger, anyway—a place that they could build from scratch.

Between 1962 and 1964, Synanon people expanded the scope and vision of their community, though they underwent more trials in the process. First, the group pursued a twenty-three-acre site in Malibu, a wealthy yet more remote beach town north of Santa Monica, where they could build a Synanon "campus," complete with apartments, "work shops," chapel, "administration building," and a swimming pool.[2] Synanon was in escrow when Malibu officials and residents organized against them for the same reasons as their counterparts in Santa Monica had; the Vice President of Malibu's Chamber of Commerce argued that Synanon should be located in a place "where the police [are] close, and where a scream can be heard."[3] This time, the city won, and Synanon's permit to build was rejected on the basis that their presence would be "detrimental to the health, safety, and welfare of Malibu."[4] Santa Monica started making rumblings about breaking the armistice shortly thereafter. But Synanon had set its sight on a new locale entirely. By August 1964, the group had purchased a large piece of mostly undeveloped land in Tomales Bay, where Synanon people first started to dream of a Synanon City.[5] While the group kept a Synanon House in Santa Monica for the rest of the decade, its home base shifted northwards to the San Francisco Bay Area.

---

[1] "SM, Synanon reach 'armistice,'" January 12, 1962, Santa Monica *Evening Outlook*, SMPL microfilm
[2] The property owner seemed thrilled to have found an interested buyer, for the land was next to a U.S. Army Air Defense site that housed nuclear warheads. "Transcript: 630403 – Synanon-Malibu Special Permit Case," UCLA Synanon
[3] "Transcript: 630403 – Synanon-Malibu Special Permit Case," Box 226, UCLA Synanon
[4] "Synanon Malibu move rejected by supervisors," May 21, 1963, Santa Monica *Evening Outlook*, SMPL microfilm.
[5] "Tomales land" shows up in Synanon's books for the first time. "Financial Statements, 5 & 8/1964," Box 68, UCLA Synanon.

This geographic shift in the mid-1960s would profoundly shape Synanon's future, bringing it into contact with the capital-C Counterculture, radical democratic movements like the Black Panthers—started in West Oakland, where Synanon opened a house in 1968—and experimental communities like the Diggers' Morningstar Ranch and Peoples' Temple. People started to get involved with Synanon because they were part of the scene, and not necessarily because they were helping addicts. The first "Game Clubs" started in San Francisco in 1965 and 1966; non-addicts paid membership dues to participate in small-s synanons, which were known by that point as Synanon Games.[6] A different generation, both demographically and culturally, moved into Synanon, too—the "flower children" of the Haight-Ashbury mixing with the "hep cats" of the 1950s beat and jazz scenes. Elena Broslovsky, who joined the Game Club in 1967 after dropping out of college in Los Angeles, hitchhiking to San Francisco, and settling in the Haight district, remembered the initial clash of cultures—Synanon men with short, slicked-back hair and Synanon women with cat-eye make-up, dancing to bebop on the hi-fi, now in the center of hippie counterculture. By the time Broslovsky moved in a few years later, those same residents were wearing beaded necklaces and dancing to The Doors.[7] Over in the Oakland House, Synanon was holding Games with Black Panthers and officers from the Oakland Police Department.[8]

[6] According to Guy Endore, Synanon people did not come up with this name—an actor working on Columbia Pictures' 1965 motion picture on the group did. Synanon had opened the armory to the crew and actors (including Eartha Kitt, who played Betty Beckham) to give them a flavor of life in the house, and invited them to watch a small-s synanon in action. Dederich "overheard one of the actors, a Britisher, saying, 'Well, that was the god-damndest most adult game I've ever watched," and thought that a new framework for the activity was "one way out of this group therapy trap" which kept ensnaring Synanon in controversies over illegal treatment and medical authority. See: "Guy Endore Synanon Games," Box 158**, UCLA Synanon.**

[7] Elena Broslovsky. Zoom interview by author, December 14, 2020

[8] Memo from Sally Johnson to Synanon Archives, January 24, 1974, Box 63, UCLA Synanon.

While Synanon was making new friends in the Bay Area, it was still at odds with the CA DOC, whose institutional addiction treatment apparatus had grown substantially in the meantime. Treatment and control were still the watchwords of government policy regarding addiction, and Synanon still existed uneasily alongside it. State legislation affirming civil commitment for addicts—by which addict cases could be committed to rehabilitation institutions instead of sentenced to jail—passed in 1962; that same year, the CA DOC opened its new facility, the California Rehabilitation Center, in Chino, about thirty-five miles east of Los Angeles. Meanwhile, by the mid-1960s, the CA DOC was still prohibiting parolees from living in Synanon, which ended up fighting that policy successfully in the courts.[9] In some ways, the autonomy that Synanon wanted over addiction and getting clean had actually gotten harder in this context. Synanon was no longer a casual gathering of addicts hanging out in a clubhouse, and institutional treatment was no longer a couple of state mental hospitals that did not want addict patients anyway. Just as the CA DOC's Civil Addict Program kept expanding in scope and size over the 1960s, Synanon had become a place of real power, too. The stakes of the conflict over who had the right to "treat" addicts, or define what "treatment" even was, only got higher.

This dissertation has tried to show the paradigmatic difference between Synanon and the institutional model that various California and local governments enforced—a difference that was not at all resolved by the time of Synanon's cultural and geographic shift in the mid-1960s, and one that has been mostly lost to history since. Synanon was not a drug rehab that became a social movement and then a cult, because Synanon, for better and for worse, was never just a drug rehab. Synanon mixing with the 1960s counterculture and social movements was not so much an entirely new phase as it was a new manifestation of streams that already existed in the

[9] "Affadavit of Charles E. Dederich," Box 541, UCLA Synanon.

group, made more legible because, now, a visible chunk of the larger society was swimming in those currents, too. Synanon people were always interested in things beyond getting clean, or, rather, they understood the process of getting clean as inevitably intertwined with the exploration of alternative ways of living. They tried to build a self-governing commune where sobriety made sense, which meant, for them, that it be a place of self-realization and social experimentation.

Bibliography

Archival Sources

Synanon Foundation records, Los Angeles, University of California Los Angeles

Nicholas C. Petris Papers, Sacramento, California State Archives

California Department of Correction records, Sacramento, California State Archives

UCLA Film and Television Archive, Los Angeles, University of California, Los Angeles

Santa Monica Newspapers, Santa Monica Public Library

Santa Monica City Council Records, Santa Monica City Hall

Los Angeles Superior Court Records, Los Angeles, Archive and Records Center

Secondary Literature

Aaron, Hillel. "The Story of This Drug Rehab-Turned-Violent Cult is Wild, Wild Country-Caliber Bizarre." *Los Angeles.* April 23, 2018. https://lamag.com/lahistory/synanon-cult.

Acker, Caroline. *Creating the American Junkie: Addiction in the Classic Era of Narcotic Control.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2002.

Alvarez, Luis. *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during World War II.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

Avila, Eric. *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

Aviv, Rachel. "The Shadow Penal System for Struggling Kids." *The New Yorker.* October 11, 2021. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/10/18/the-shadow-penal-system-for-struggling-kids.

Bach, Damon R. *The American Counterculture: A History of Hippies and Cultural Dissidents*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2020.

Bayer, Ronald. *Homosexuality and American Psychiatry: The Politics of Diagnosis.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

Bennett, Alexander S. "The Discovery and Treatment of Juvenile Drug Use in Post-World War II Los Angeles." Ph.D. dissertation. Carnegie Mellon University, 2009.

Braslow, Joel. *Mental Ills and Bodily Cures: Psychiatric Treatment in the First Half of the Twentieth Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

Campbell, Nancy. *Discovering Addiction: The Science and Politics of Substance Abuse Research.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007.

Casriel, Daniel. *So Fair A House: The Story of Synanon.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963.

Chavigny, Katherina A. "Reforming Drunkards in Nineteenth-Century America," 108-123, in *Altering American Consciousness: The History of Alcohol and Drug Use in the United States, 1800-2000*, eds. Sarah W. Tracy and Caroline Jean Acker. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004.

Cherkis, Jason. "Dying to Be Free." *Huffington Post.* January 28, 2015. https://projects.huffingtonpost.com/dying-to-be-free-heroin-treatment.

Clark, Claire D. *The Recovery Revolution: The Battle Over Addiction Treatment.* New York: New York University, 2017.

Courtwright, David. *Dark Paradise: A History of Opiate Addiction in America.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Courtwright, David, Herman Joseph, and Don Des Jarlais. *Addicts Who Survived: An Oral History of Narcotic Use in America before 1965.* Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989.

Davis, Mike. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. New York: Verso, 2006.

Davis, Mike and Jon Wiener, *Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties*. New York: Verso, 2020.

Devienne, Elsa. "Urban Renewal by the Sea: Reinventing the Beach for the Suburban Age in Postwar Los Angeles," *Journal of Urban History* 45, no. 1 (2019), 99-125.

Dickstein, Morris. *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977.

Dyck, Erika. 'Hitting Highs at Rock Bottom': LSD Treatment for Alcoholism, 1950-1970." *Social History of Medicine,* 19, no. 2 (2006), 313-329.

Ehrenreich, Barbara. *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment.* Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1983.

Elkind, Sarah S. *How Local Politics Shape Federal Policy: Business, Power, & the Environment in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles.* Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011.

Endore, Guy. *Synanon.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1968.

Escobar, Edward J. *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity: Mexican Americans and the Los Angeles Police Department, 1900-1945.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

Fairfield, Richard and Timothy Miller, *The Modern Utopian: Alternative Communities of '60s and '70s*. Process Books, 2010.

Felber, Garrett. *Those Who Know Don't Say: The Nation of Islam, the Black Freedom Movement, and the Carceral State.* Durham, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019.

Ford, John Anson. *Thirty Explosive Years in Los Angeles County.* San Marino, California: The Huntington Library, 1961.

Frydl, Kathleen J. *The Drug Wars in America, 1940-1973.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Goldstein, Alyosha. *Poverty in Common: The Politics of Community Action During the American Century*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.

Goluboff, Risa L. *Vagrant Nation: Public Power, Constitutional Change, and the Making of the 1960s.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Gornick, Vivian. *The Romance of American Communism*. New York: Verso, 2020.

Gowan, Teresa and Sarah Whetstone. "Making the criminal addict: Subjectivity and social control in a strong-arm rehab." *Punishment and Society* 14, no. 1 (2012), 69-93.

Grob, Gerald. *From Asylum to Community: Mental Health Policy in Modern America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.

Grogan, Jessica. *Encountering America: Humanistic Psychology, Sixties Culture, and the Shaping of the Modern Self.* New York: HarperCollins, 2013.

Halliwell, Martin. *Therapeutic Revolutions: Medicine, Psychiatry, and American Culture, 1945-1970.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013.

Harcourt, Bernard E. "An Institutionalization Effect: The Impact of Mental Hospitalization and Imprisonment on Homicide in the United States, 1934-2001." *The Journal of Legal Studies*, 40, no. 1 (2011).

Hayden, Dolores. *Seven American Utopias: The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism, 1790-1975.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1979.

Herman, Ellen. *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts/* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Herzberg, David. *White Market Drugs: Big Pharma and the Hidden History of Addiction in America.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020.

Hine, Robert V. *California's Utopian Colonies.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966.

Hyde, Lewis. *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World.* New York: Vintage Books, 2007.

Illouz, Eva. *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

Janssen, Volker. "From the Inside Out: Therapeutic Penology and Political Liberalism in Postwar California." *Osiris*, 22, no. 1 (2007), 116-134.

Janzen, Rod. *The Rise and Fall of Synanon: A California Utopia*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2001.

Jefferson, Alison Rose. "African American Leisure Space in Santa Monica: The Beach Sometimes Known As the "Inkwell," 1900s-1960s," *Southern California Quarterly,* 91, no. 2 (2009) 155-189.

Kaminer, Wendy. *'I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional': The Recovery Movement and Other Self-Help Fashions*. New York: Vintage, 1993.

Kaskutas, Lee Ann. "The Social Model Approach to Substance Abuse Recovery: A Program of Research and Evaluation: Part One," Alcohol Research Group (April 1999), A-1.

Kaye, Kerwin. *Enforcing Freedom: Drug Courts, Therapeutic Communities, and the Intimacies of the State.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.

Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road.* New York: Viking Press, 1957.

Kohler-Hausmann, Julilly. *Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.

Kramer, Alisa Sarah. "William H. Parker and the Thin Blue Line: Politics, Public Relations and Policing in Postwar Los Angeles." Ph.D. dissertation. American University, 2007.

Kaufman, Kevin. "Rigorous Honesty: A Cultural History of Alcoholics Anonymous, 1935-1960." Ph.D. dissertation. Loyola University Chicago, 2011.

Lassiter, Matthew. "Pushers, Victims, and the Lost Innocence of White Suburbia: California's War on Narcotics during the 1950s." *Journal of Urban History*, 41, no. 5 (2015), 787-807.

---. "Impossible Criminals: The Suburban Imperatives of America's War on Drugs." *Journal of American History*, 102, no. 1 (2015), 126–140.

Lattin, Don. *Distilled Spirits: Getting High, Then Sober, With a Famous Writer, a Forgotten Philosopher, and a Hopeless Drunk.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

---. *The Harvard Psychedelic Club: How Timothy Leary, Ram Dass, Huston Smith, and Andrew Weil Killed the Fifties and Ushered in a New Age for America*. New York: HarperOne, 2011.

Lunbeck, Elizabeth. *The Psychiatric Persuasion: Knowledge, Gender, and Power in Modern American.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Macías, Anthony. "Bringing Music to the People: Race, Urban Culture, and Municipal Politics in Postwar Los Angeles." *American Quarterly*, 56, no. 3 (2004), 693-717.

Marineli, Filio, Gregory Tsoucalas, Marianna Karamanou, and George Androutsos. "Mary Mallon (1869-1938) and the history of typhoid fever." *Annals of Gastroenterology* 26, no. 2 (2013), 132-134.

Maynard, John Arthur. *Venice West: The Beat Generation in Southern California*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993.

McWilliams, Carey. *California: The Great Exception.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

Miller, Timothy. "The Roots of the 1960s Communal Revival." *American Studies,* 33, no. 2 (1992), 73-93.

Molina, Natalia. *Fit to Be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939.* Berkeley: University of California, 2006.

Morgan, H. Wayne. *Drugs in America: A Social History, 1800-1980.* Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1981.

Morgan, Sandra. *Into Our Own Hands: The Women's Health Movement in the United States, 1969-1990*. New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2002.

Moskowitz, Eva. *In Therapy We Trust: America's Obsession with Self-Fulfillment*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2001.

Murch, Donna. *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California.* Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

Musto, David F. *The American Disease: Origins of Narcotic Control,* Third Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Nelson, Alondra. *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

Nicholas, Phil and Andrew Churchill. "The Federal Bureau of Narcotics, the states, and the origins of modern drug enforcement in the United States, 1950-1962." *Contemporary Drug Problems* 39 (2012), 620-622.

Nicolaides, Becky. *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Novak, Matt. "Synanon's Sober Utopia: How a Drug Rehab Program Became a Violent Cult." *Gizmodo.* April 15, 2014. https://gizmodo.com/synanons-sober-utopia-how-a-drug-rehab-program-became-1562665776.

Novak, Steven J. "LSD before Leary: Sidney Cohen's Critique of 1950s Psychedelic Drug Research." *Isis,* 88, no. 1 (1997), 87-110.

Ofshe, Richard. "The Social Development of the Synanon Cult: The Managerial Strategy of Organizational Transformation." *Sociological Analysis*, 41, no. 2 (1980), 109-127.

Paglia, Camille. "Cults and Cosmic Consciousness: Religious Vision in the American 1960s," *Arion* 10, no. 3 (2003), 57-111.

Peele, Stanton. *The Diseasing of America: Addiction Treatment out of Control.* Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989.

Plant, Rebecca Jo. "Preventing the Inevitable: John Appel and the Problem of Psychiatric Casualties in the US Army During World War II," 209-238, in *Science and Emotions after 1945,* ed. Frank Biess and Daniel M. Gross. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Prickett, Pamela J. *Believing in South Central: Everyday Islam in the City of Angels*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021.

Rapping, Elayne. *The Culture of Recovery: Making Sense of the Self-Help Movement in Women's Lives.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.

Reinarman, Craig. "Twelve-Step Movements and Advanced Capitalist Culture: On the Politics of Self Control in Postmodernity," in *Social Movements and Cultural Politics,* Marcy Darnovsky, Barbara Epstein, and Richard Flacks, eds. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995.

Roberts, Samuel. "'Rehabilitation' as Boundary Object: Medicalization, Local Activism, and Narcotics Addiction Policy in New York City, 1951-62." *The Social History of Alcohol and Drugs,* 26, no. 2 (2012), 147-169.

Room, Robin. "Alcoholism and Alcoholics Anonymous in U.S. Films, 1945-1962: The Party Ends for the 'Wet Generations.'" *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 50, no. 4 (1989), 368-381.

Rotskoff, Lori. *Love on the Rocks: Men, Women, and Alcohol in Post-World War II America.* Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

Schneider, Eric C. *Smack: Heroin and the American City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.

Schrank, Sarah. *Art and the City: Civic Imagination and Cultural Authority in Los Angeles.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.

Sheehy, Peter Phillips. "The Triumph of Group Therapeutics: Therapy, the Social Self, and Liberalism in America, 1910-1960." Ph.D. dissertation. University of Virginia, 2002.

Shephard, Ben. *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Twentieth Century.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.

Sides, Josh. *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

Speaker, Susan. "'The Struggle of Mankind Against its Deadliest Foe': Themes of Counter-Subversion in Anti-Narcotic Campaigns, 1920-1950." *Journal of Social History,* Vol 34, No. 3 (March 2001), 591-610.

Spillane, Joseph. "Inside the Fantastic Lodge: Relational ties, gender, and addict identity." *Social History of Drugs and Alcohol*, 31, no. 1 (2017), 65-84.

Stone, Bob. *My Years with Narcotics Anonymous*. Hulon Pendleton Publishing, 1997.

Szalavitz, Maia. "The Cult That Spawned the Tough-Love Teen Industry." *Mother Jones*. September/October 2007.

Tracy, Sarah W. "Building a Boozatorium: State Medical Reform for Iowa's Inebriates, 1902-1920," 124-164, in *Altering American Consciousness: The History of Alcohol and Drug Use in the United States, 1800-2000*, eds. Sarah W. Tracy and Caroline Jean Acker. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004.

Travis, Trysh. *The Language of the Heart: A Cultural History of the Recovery Movement from Alcoholics Anonymous to Oprah Winfrey.* Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013.

Tuttle, William M. *"Daddy's Gone to War": The Second World War in the Lives of America's Children*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

White, William L. *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America*: Bloomington, IL: Chestnut Health Systems, 1998.

White, William L., Mark Sanders and Tanya Sanders. "Addiction in the African American Community: The Recovery Legacies of Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X." *Counselor,* 7, no. 5 (2006), 53-58.

Widener, Daniel. *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

Yablonsky, Lewis. *The Tunnel Back: Synanon.* New York: Macmillan, 1965.

---. *The Hippie Trip.* New York: Pegasus, 1968.

Yang, Mina. "A Thin Blue Line down Central Avenue: The LAPD and the Demise of a Musical Hub," *Black Music Research Journal,* 22, no. 2 (2002), 217-239.

Audio-Visual Material

American Rehab, episode 2, "Miracle on the Beach," aired July 2020, https://revealnews.org/podcast/american-rehab-chapter-two-miracle-on-the-beach/.

Deadly Cults. Season 2, episode 8, "Synanon." Aired June 14, 2020, on Oxygen Network. https://www.oxygen.com/deadly-cults/season-2/episode-8/synanon.